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## A Garrett College learning community experience: A case study and the birth of a program

Lonnie Calvin Brewster  
*West Virginia University*

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**A Garrett College Learning Community Experience:  
A Case Study and the Birth of a Program**

**Lonnie Calvin Brewster**

**Dissertation submitted to the  
College of Human Resources and Education  
at West Virginia University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**Doctor of Education  
in  
Curriculum and Instruction**

**Ron Iannone, Chair  
Lillian Mitchell  
Patricia Obenauf  
Perry Phillips  
Jaci Webb-Dempsey**

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Academic Achievement, Retention, Case Study, Social Interaction**

## **ABSTRACT**

### **A Garrett College Learning Community Experience: A Case Study and the Birth of a Program**

**Lonnie Calvin Brewster**

This study follows the progress of 19 students who enrolled in a course cluster learning community at Garrett College in the fall of 2002. The purposes of the study were to determine if participation in a learning community experience at Garrett College would have a positive impact on students' academic achievement, attitude toward education, and retention, with outcomes to determine whether Garrett College should launch a learning community initiative. Results were garnered from interviews with 15 of the 19 students and an examination of academic records of all 19 students. The study suggests that learning community participation at Garrett College does foster high retention rates, high academic achievement, and positive attitudes toward education. Emergent themes suggest that changes in pedagogy should include more collaborative and student-centered learning opportunities and that supportive communication helps students to adjust to college.

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## Chapter One

### An Introduction and Overview

#### Statement of the Problem:

Informal discussions with students at Garrett College have shown that some students who enroll at the 2-year college have been denied admission to a four-year institution. Others have started their higher education experiences at a four-year institution and failed to succeed, and many have graduated high school without having had any rigorous academic training. Many students with whom I have conversed believe that education is their only access to a quality of life once taken for granted by millions who had secure employment in an industrial society. Some have stated that they are ill prepared for the rigors of academic life because they have been socially promoted or given high school diplomas for participating in sports, or they have gone through vocational programs that emphasized the development of school-to-work skills at the expense of academic learning. Many students indicate in informal polls that English is their worst subject, or certainly their least favorite, and that the educational process is boring, albeit necessary.

During my first seven years at Garrett College, recurring themes at faculty meetings included concerns about enrollment; worries about poor retention rates; questions about low academic achievement; discussions about the need for more collaborative, student-centered pedagogy; and insights to the special needs of an at-risk student population. As time passed, the characteristics of teaching and learning seemed unchanged. Teachers expressed concern, dutifully attended professional development meetings, and, for the most part, returned to their traditional methods of teaching, attempting to fill empty vessels.

Freire (1997) discusses the banking concept of education in which students are made depositories for information that teachers narrate. Freire states that “Education is suffering from narration sickness” and that, to change the system, the teacher must simultaneously become a student, helping other students to pursue inquiry in the world, with the world, and with each other (pp. 52-53).

In the fall of 1997, I received a brochure from the academic dean at Garrett College, with a note asking if any faculty were interested in attending a conference about learning communities in Miami in January of 1998. With a shiver, I recalled the ice storms and heavy snows of 1996 and quickly decided that I would love to travel to Miami. In addition to craving sunshine, I was also intrigued with the concept on which the conference would focus—learning communities. A colleague, a computer science teacher, who had been hired to teach at Garrett the same year that I had been hired, decided that he too would attend the conference. The experience proved to be the awakening I had been seeking. I attended a workshop conducted by Jean MacGregor—Learning Communities 101. I discovered Vincent Tinto in another workshop, and I was entranced by the stories of how college campuses were being transformed through learning communities. The University of Miami, host of the conference, seemed to function as one large learning community, with small groups of students working

together near the student center, on the lawn, and beneath Cyprus trees draped with Spanish moss. I returned to Garrett and immediately sought permission to establish a learning community. Initially, the dean of academic affairs was reluctant, but gave me permission to conduct a limited pilot. I floundered through a semester with a group of students and discovered that, despite my lack of knowledge and expertise, student response was positive.

That same year, I had been given Hull and Greville's *Tech Prep: The Next Generation* (1998). In a message similar to Friere's, they define "the neglected majority: students with average to poor academic achievement due mainly to the fact they are contextual learners floundering in an abstract learning environment" (p. 7). I thought more about how I had found ways to entertain myself during seemingly unending lectures during my undergraduate experience: propping my chin in my hand to feign attention while I daydreamed, catching up on personal correspondence to pretend I was taking notes, and counting the number of times my instructor said "uh," "um," and "well." I recalled the glazed look in the eyes of my own students when I had rambled on about participles, gerunds, and infinitives. Although my teaching evaluations were usually quite good, I knew I could do much more to engage students and to make learning meaningful.

The following year, I attended my second conference on learning communities, traveling to Seattle. I discovered Lenning and Ebbers' *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities* (1999) and promptly read it cover to cover. The book begins with the question, "Why do we need learning communities?" I was intrigued by their discussion of "communities of learners" and their claims that learning communities can improve retention and academic achievement. I thought more about the concept of collaborative learning, and I became fascinated with the concept of student-centered learning and of teachers as learners. The authors' statement, "Too often the concept of community within higher education is paid only lip service, and its potential goes unrealized" (p. iii) made me think more about my role as teacher. I had to ask myself if I had neglected my students, if I could have done more to create a welcoming and supportive community for them, if I had contributed to their failure, if I had contributed to the narration sickness described by Friere.

My travel to conferences had been funded through a Tech Prep grant, and I began to think about possible connections between Tech Prep and the learning community movement. Using Tech Prep funding, I was also permitted to purchase books that might help to reform teaching. I discovered Sonia Nieto's *The Light in Their Eyes* (1999) and was smitten by one of her statements: "The way students are thought about and treated by society and consequently by the schools they attend and the educators who teach them is fundamental in creating academic success or failure" (p. 167). Images of students who had failed to succeed in my English classes floated through my memory. To what degree had I been responsible for their failure? I thought more about the Tech Prep movement, its emphasis on the need to reform teaching to make learning meaningful and purposeful.

Tech Prep is an educational reform movement that "focuses on, but is not limited to the 'neglected majority,'" according to Hull and Greville (1998). They see Tech Prep as a reform movement that can motivate higher academic achievement through improved teaching methods, integrated curriculum, and elevated standards. Tech Prep addresses the needs of students who had no plans to attend college and were assimilated into the general education track. Many such students dropped out of high school because they

could not make connections between the information they were being asked to learn and ways they might use it later in life—not because they lacked the intelligence to learn (p. 7). The descriptors listed by Hull and Greville seemed to apply to students with whom I had been working at Garrett.

Tech Prep advocates argue that course requirements must be more challenging and that the types of experiences students need include learning to solve problems, projects that are related to real-world problems, and learning to work in teams, as well as learning to work independently (p. 73).

Despite the efforts of Tech Prep advocates and the successes of some technical programs in the 1990s, significant numbers of students continue to enroll in community colleges and four-year institutions without having acquired the skills necessary for success, particularly language and math skills. Because of their lack of preparation, many students at Garrett College, as well as at numerous other U.S. colleges, place into one or more developmental classes. A significant percentage of these students often have to take one or more full semesters of developmental coursework. Data collected by American College Testing Services between January and May, 1997 indicated a dropout rate of 47.4% from the freshman to the sophomore year at the nation's associate/public colleges. Additional reports indicate that from 1983 to 1998, the dropout rate continued to increase slightly but steadily at two-year institutions, and that the degree completion rate decreased more than the dropout rate increased (1998, April 1).

In addition to being poorly prepared for college academics, many Garrett College students opt to major in “general studies.” The *2002 Databook*, published by the Maryland Association of Community Colleges, indicates that of the 135 first-time full-time freshmen enrolled at Garrett in the fall of 2001, 91 were general studies majors (pp. 7-9). Declaring general studies as a major is not necessarily an unwise decision if students see such studies as preparatory to lifelong learning, as opposed to procrastination of career choice. In 1852, Newman explored the questions of what it means to be educated and the role of a liberal arts education. Many of his thoughts and questions set forth in *The Idea of a University* are appropriate for the faculty and administration of Garrett College to consider. Newman states that “all branches of knowledge are connected together” and that “they complete, correct, balance each other.” He sees a liberal education as “...a habit of mind [that] is formed [and] which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.” He also states that knowledge “...ever leads to something beyond itself, which therefore is its end” (pp. 75-86). Many students who initially declare general studies as a major may come to see their studies as a time of preparation for more narrowly defined studies. They eventually make career decisions, having been enriched by their experiences and academically prepared for higher levels of learning. They may see general studies as a liberal education that will give them access to a number of possible options, once their career decisions have been made, or once their hopes of becoming professional athletes fade. For some, however, general studies may serve as a prelude to dropping out.

The Boyer Commission's report, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities* (1987) states that the freshman year has become a year of remediation and that universities [and colleges] face the challenge of serving the needs of these poorly prepared students while maintaining standards and institutional mission. The U.S. system of higher education enrolls a larger percentage of



the country's population than does any other country in the world. Many students accumulate credits that comprise an incoherent body of knowledge, and graduate with poor writing and speaking skills, ill-prepared to enter professional positions (pp. 5-6).

The Commission maintains that universities [and colleges] must transform the nature of education to make undergraduates sharers of intellectual wealth by integrating them into research and teaching experiences. They see universities as "communities of learners" where "the shared goals of investigation and discovery should bind together the disparate elements to create a sense of wholeness." Everyone at a university [or college] should be a discoverer, a learner; and all students should be participants in the university's mission; however, according to the Commission, there is a continuance of complacency, indifference, and forgetfulness toward the students whose tuition supports the academic enterprise (pp. 12-28).

Colleges and universities, which are admitting students who are ill prepared for the academic rigors of higher education, must find ways to meet the needs of those students.

While the Tech Prep movement has experienced a significant degree of success in improving teaching methodology, the integration of technology and the core curriculum, and student learning in the workplace, colleges still face the challenge of educating students whose high school experiences have not prepared them for the academic rigor of higher education. In "Developing Intellectual Skills," Doherty, Chenevert, Miller, Roth, and Truchan (1997) argue that teachers can help students develop intellectual skills by helping them to integrate their learning and by helping them to see coherence in their educational endeavors. Coherence and integration within major areas of study will help students transfer skills across disciplines. The researchers note that for teachers to aid students with transferability, teachers must develop ways to think of themselves as scholars, think of their disciplines as frameworks for student learning, and become familiar with areas other than their discipline specialties (pp. 170-189). The learning community may provide the framework within which such teaching and learning can occur.

The learning community movement is a national reform movement that has consistently gained momentum during the past decade. It emphasizes collaboration among teachers, among students, and among teachers and students. It insists upon active learning as opposed to passive learning (banking), and it focuses upon integrating curriculum to provide students with more meaningful learning experiences. Learning communities have also proven effective in improving student retention and academic performance.

Since the late 1980s, the term "learning community" has become prominent in the United States. A curriculum model adopted at Evergreen State College, with support from the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, provided the spark needed to ignite a national movement. The Washington Center is a state-funded consortium of forty-four colleges and universities. Its initiatives are supported by a number of grants, including grants from the Exxon and Ford Foundations (Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, & Gabelnick, 1997, p. 461), as well as funding from the U.S. Department of Education.

The four basic categories of student learning communities are curricular learning communities, classroom learning communities, residential learning communities, and

student-type learning communities. These categories may be combined in a variety of ways (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, p. iii).

### **Types of Learning Communities:**

Some types of student learning communities that have grown from these general categories include cross-curricular learning communities, freshman interest groups, linked courses, course clusters, federated learning communities, coordinated studies, curricular cohort learning communities, curricular area learning communities, total classroom learning communities, and within-classroom learning communities.

Originally, the focus of the cross-curricular learning community was to foster collaborative learning among first-year college students. The design was to help students overcome inhibitions and anxieties, and to help them adjust to college and to achieve academic success. This type of learning involves a restructuring of the curriculum to link courses or course work to help students find greater coherence in what they are learning.

Freshman interest groups enroll 20 to 40 students as one group in courses that permit students to choose from a list of special interests, allowing them to link their courses according to the selected topic. The students in the group take related courses, but the faculty are not expected to coordinate syllabi or to co-plan; however, the FIG may have a student or faculty member who serves as adviser/mentor to help students explore issues and discover resources related to the topic that *connects* the courses.

Linked courses are pairs of courses that are related through content or focus. Faculty determine that focus, and a group of students co-register for the courses. Faculty may or may not coordinate syllabi, assignments, and activities.

Course clusters are special versions of linked courses. Group members enroll in three or four courses, taught by instructors who work together to link the content of the courses. The designated courses comprise most of the course load for students in the learning community, but they may take courses outside the learning community. Faculty teaching courses in the course cluster also teach courses outside the learning community.

Federated learning communities, coordinated studies, curricular cohorts, and curricular area learning communities involve larger numbers of students, longer periods of time, and less flexibility for faculty to teach both within learning communities and outside learning communities (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, pp. 15-27). Freshmen interest groups, linked courses, and course clusters seem to be more viable options for small schools such as Garrett.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

While a variety of learning communities exist at multiple educational levels, the purpose of this study is to focus on a learning community which is probably most accurately defined as a thematically linked course cluster. This learning community focused on at-risk college students. This cohort was enrolled in general education classes at Garrett College, a predominantly commuter college in rural western Maryland, with an average college-wide, full time enrollment of about 200 students. The study focuses on a group of 19 students who elected to enroll in a learning community. The purpose of the study is to determine whether learning communities can improve academic success rates and retention rates for students at Garrett College and whether an evaluation of the experiences of the student cohort involved in a learning community in the fall of 2002

provide rationale for Garrett College to launch a learning community initiative. More specifically, the purposes of the study are as follow:

- To determine whether participation in a learning community affects students' academic performance.

In 2000, 195 Garrett College students received mid-term deficiency letters. In 2001, 218 students received mid-term deficiency letters, and in 2002, the year in which this study occurred, 178 students received mid-term deficiency letters (DiGiovanni, 2006). While statistics are not available to show how many students actually failed a class for which they received a mid-term deficiency, an informal poll of faculty indicates that many believe the mid-term deficiency often foreshadows students' receiving a grade of less than a C in the course.

- To determine whether students in the learning community cohort perceive themselves as academic achievers, to determine whether they perceive participation in the learning community as a contributing factor to their academic success, with academic success defined as a minimal grade point average of 2.0 (C average) on a 4.0 scale, and to determine whether academic records support students' perception of success.
- To determine whether participation in a learning community fosters positive attitudes toward education and if so, to identify what happens in a learning community environment that contributes to the positive attitude. My hypothesis is that positive attitude equates to positive experience.
- To determine whether participation in a learning community affects retention.

The Garrett College 2005 Accountability Report indicates that the second year retention rate (fall to fall for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students) was 62.0% for the 200 cohort, 66.2% for the 2001 cohort, 66.4% for the 2002 cohort, and 59.1% for the 2003 cohort (Stem, 2006).

- To contribute to the field of research and knowledge about learning communities, specifically to share information and knowledge gained by submitting this dissertation to The Washington Center for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education, the national dissemination center for information on learning communities, at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington.
- To provide a case study basis that will help faculty and administration decide whether Garrett College should launch a learning community initiative.
- To provide a case study basis that will help faculty and administration design more effective learning community experiences and design more effective research methods for future learning community research at Garrett College.

## **Definition of Terms:**

For the purposes of this study, a learning community is defined as a cohort of students who share the common characteristic of being at risk, who have declared general studies as their major, and who are enrolled in thematically-linked general education courses.

- At-risk: Students may be deemed at risk because they are involved in athletics, which mandate a hectic schedule that often interferes with academics. They may be minority students attending a predominantly all white school. They may be employed full or part-time. They may be first generation college students. In most cases, however, they will be students who achieved only marginal academic success in high school and are under prepared for college.
- Thematically linked—a broad theme links units of study and the content of courses designated as learning community courses. The thematic link is designed to help students make interdisciplinary connections. The theme of this learning community was Developing Global Perspectives and Understanding Our Multiple Identities.

## **Significance of the Study:**

In “Evaluating and Assessing Learning Communities,” Ketcheson and Levine (1999) note that “Assessment of learning communities ... requires a more creative approach [than tests, papers, and course grades] which acknowledges that teaching and learning occur in a dynamic environment, comprising various academic and social interactions.” They call for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods and a flexible research design to “capture the broad picture of what students and teachers experience as members of learning communities.” They encourage a number of assessment techniques, including individual interviews and self-assessment. They note that “As the number of campuses implementing learning communities increases, there is greater demand for evidence that learning communities work.” Faculty and administrators gather annually at regional and national conferences to share examples of best practices. A number of universities have created web pages and e-mail discussion groups to share information. Ketcheson and Levine report, however, that at all schools which are forming learning communities, “the information gathered on the learning community program needs to be interpreted and communicated to the decision makers, faculty, and students who can use the findings to maximize the benefits of participating in a learning community.” In short, a substantial amount of information related to theory, and many articles that informally report learning community experiences, are available, as a review of the literature indicates, but more formal studies must be conducted to validate the learning community experience; hence, the significance of this study.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Literature**

This dissertation is the result of 8 years of work and study. My preparation included attending annual national conferences on learning communities; reading a series of books, articles, and unpublished dissertations related to the learning community movement; writing a series of papers as course requirements in graduate classes at West Virginia University; piloting learning communities at Garrett College; serving as group leader for 10 educators from Garrett College to attend the 2005 National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at Evergreen State College; making presentations to the faculty, staff, and administrators at Garrett College; and taking the initiative in planning an all-campus learning community retreat for Garrett College employees in the fall of 2005.

Conference attendance has taken me to Miami, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Seattle, and New York. At conferences, I attended workshops and obtained literature about learning communities. While each conference showcased talented, knowledgeable speakers and the opportunity to purchase books or to secure free readings, I kept searching for a guide that would help me develop a success-guaranteed learning community at Garrett College. I learned that there is no such guide. I discovered that each institution must tailor the learning community experience for the unique needs of its students, the abilities and interests of its faculty, and the availability of funding. Having made some preliminary efforts to establish learning communities, I knew I had to engage in research and formal reporting of my efforts to make my findings credible and to encourage other faculty to become involved in the Learning Community movement. Many community college teachers don't engage in research to the extent that professors in four-year institutions do because they just don't have the time with a teaching load of five classes. I had been such a teacher; therefore, I applied for sabbatical and was granted the 2001-2002 school year to continue doctoral studies at West Virginia University. As a result of my reading and travels, I have attempted to identify common threads in available literature and in conference presentations:

- Several educational movements have helped to form the roots of the learning community movement.
- The learning community movement has a rich history of its own.
- Student-centered pedagogy is typically associated with learning communities.
- Learning communities have multiple effects upon students.
- Learning communities have multiple effects upon teachers.

#### **The Roots of the Learning Community Movement**

During the 1920s and 1930s, essentialists were critiquing the child-centered and social-centered changes sought by progressives of that era. The Progressive Education Association had been advocating child-centered education, creativity, and freedom (student choice). Kilpatrick, among others, developed a child-centered theory, built on school activities that were supposed to be meaningful for children and also relevant to society. The problem was that the approach became oversimplified and became an end in itself rather than a tool for enhancing student learning. Progressive theories worked well in some private schools and just a few public schools. Unfortunately, some reformers

encouraged types of child-centered activity that contained neither social content nor traditional subject matter. The failure to include a social agenda caused progressive education to lose its link to what many saw as a need for social reform in the 1920s. Social reconstructionism failed to take hold within the Progressive Education Association in the 1930s. The advent of the modern high school saw a split in the curriculum, with students tracked in vocational or college prep courses. Curriculum reform produced the core curriculum and courses that taught life skills. Progressive educators, with their child-centered curricula, failed to pay enough attention to life outside schools after World War II. Charles Prosser, a vocational education leader, expressed concern that the modern high schools were not adequately serving America's youth. The college prep and vocational polarities of the curriculum were failing to serve about 60 percent of students. He called for life adjustment courses such as business math and business English. The high school curriculum changed dramatically (Urban, 2000, pp. 179-246).

In the 1950s, anti-progressivism and traditionalism prevailed once again. In 1953, Arthur Bestor published his book, *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in our Public Schools*. He lashed out at faculty in schools of education for what he considered intellectual flabbiness, calling for more intellectual training of teachers and a more intellectual high school curriculum. The PEA movement ended and the PEA journal ceased publication. The Russian launching of the first space satellite initiated yet another call for drastic curricular change. American students' skills in reading, writing, math, and science were seen as inferior to their Russian counterparts' abilities. The argument was made for federal educational aid (with strings attached) to close the perceived gap in science and technology (Urban and Wagoner, 2000, pp. 247-296).

In 1959, Jerome Bruner met with other reform minded psychologists and scientists to discuss the direction of curriculum reform. Bruner argued that the schools needed a carefully structured approach to learning in the academic disciplines, claiming that young people of any age could learn to think like scholars. Bruner's hypothesis was that any subject could be taught in some form to any child at any state of development. His hypothesis created the basis for a curriculum created by academics but with teaching guided by instructional and developmental psychologists.

Bruner's position serves as the basis of the philosophy of many modern teachers: every child is capable of learning. At first glance, one might think that such an approach to curriculum reform should have appeased both intellectual and academic reformers, but the academic reformers failed to consider the insights of educators in the trenches, or the degree of discomfort that new math and other approaches would cause (Urban and Wagoner, 2000, pp. 297-298). Change that is decreed, as opposed to coming from the ranks, is bound to occur very slowly, if at all.

Numerous other factors have affected curriculum change and methodology in American education. Desegregation, open classrooms, multiculturalism, internationalism, the War on Poverty, presidential agendas, standardized testing, moral education, school prayer, home schooling, *A Nation at Risk*, the cultural literacy movement, site-based management, drugs and violence, and school mergers (just to name a few) have affected our schools. While numerous social issues, political movements, and curricular experiments have affected how our schools operate, one fact remains constant: the most important figure in the learning that does or does not take place in the classroom is the teacher—not necessarily the teacher talking, but the teacher as learner—

the teacher who facilitates student-centered learning, a concept which is integral to the Learning Community Movement.

### **The History of Learning Communities:**

Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, and Gabelnick (1997) describe the essence of learning communities in “Creating Learning Communities,” found in the *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum*. They note that factors other than the form and content of curriculum contribute to powerful educational settings. Some learning environments are characterized by a sense of community, where rich, rigorous learning takes place, and where both students and faculty are community participants. Such communities foster student success, but how can educators create such an environment, especially on a commuter campus such as that found at Garrett College or any other college where a significant number of both faculty and students are part-time? In addition, even small colleges struggle with the issues of departmentalization and fragmented curricula.

As previously stated, learning communities are conscious curricular structures that thematically link two or more disciplines. Matthews, et al trace learning communities from Meiklejohn’s Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. Meiklejohn proposed a two-year undergraduate program in which students and faculty explored the values of democracy by reading and discussing the works of ancient Greece and comparing that culture to contemporary America. The experiment died during the Depression; but his experiment led to a similar program by Tussman at the University of California in the 1960s, which was also short-lived.

In 1970, Evergreen State College was founded. Evergreen’s planning faculty designed the college around interdisciplinary study. In the mid-1970s, SUNY Stony Brook introduced the model for Federated Learning Communities to encourage better teaching and more involvement among faculty. In 1978 LaGuardia Community College required all of its day students in liberal arts programs to take an eleven-credit cluster of courses that included writing, social sciences, and humanities.

The University of Washington developed its Interdisciplinary Writing Program in the late 1970s; and with higher education reports in the mid-1980s again calling for curriculum reform and changes in pedagogy, learning communities began to proliferate because of their approach to connecting and rethinking curriculum. Linked, clustered, and federated classes, as well as coordinated studies programs have continued to develop with funding from such organizations as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, the Exxon Education Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, and the Ford Foundation.

In 1984 the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education was founded with support from Exxon and the Ford Foundations. It continues to support learning community programs in the state of Washington and now serves as the national dissemination center for information on learning communities (Matthews, et al, 1997, pp. 457-475).

### **Learning Community Pedagogy:**

Making connections across the curriculum, teamwork, multi-semester planning, and team teaching are characteristics of learning communities. In “Exploring Learning Communities in the Two Year College” (1999), Bailey advocates a “just in time” theory, a concept used in manufacturing. A parts provider delivers parts to a factory just when they are needed, instead of warehousing stockpiles; so too must students make use of

knowledge when it's time. Learning communities make such a practice possible. Bailey states that "In the learning community, everything is open to question and subject to multidisciplinary scrutiny by people who know how to teach." Learning community models encourage faculty to learn from students, students to learn from each other, and faculty to learn from other faculty as everyone engages in cross-curricular group projects, experiential learning, integrated assignments, and team teaching. The concept of "just in time" learning encourages collaboration among students, among teachers, and among students and teachers.

Numerous writers advocate the use of collaborative learning, a key characteristic of learning communities. In *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (1996), Bean discusses writing to promote thinking, as well as the connections between thinking and writing, focusing upon the importance of both formal writing assignments and informal, exploratory writing. He advocates using small groups to encourage thinking and holding group conferences to discuss common writing problems.

Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) recommend that students carry out research on central topics in small groups and share what they learn with other groups. They further recommend that students use computers to work together and make sense of the world around them by advancing their own state of knowledge, as well as that of the class. In "Learning Communities in the Classroom: Advancing Knowledge for a Lifetime," they state that the teacher should make sure that all students participate in discussion and often ask students to explain other students' ideas.

In *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future*, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) discuss the need for developing learning communities to promote and maximize learning, and note that the "essence of higher education...is to emphasize learning and collaboration, thereby stimulating learning for individuals and groups."

Walls (1999) states that "When you are a teacher, you have only one reason for being there [in the classroom]. That reason is to facilitate learning." Note that he uses the word "facilitate." The term implies that the acquisition of knowledge occurs within the learner, not within the teacher. In "Effective Teaching," chapter two of his book, *Psychological Foundations of Learning*, Walls cites a number of studies that support his hypothesis: the effective teacher changes student behaviors or capabilities. He lists five variables of teacher effectiveness: clarity, variability, enthusiasm, task-oriented behaviors, and student opportunity. From these variables, Walls lists what he calls the "four aces of effective teaching": outcomes, clarity, engagement, and enthusiasm. The first emphasizes academic objectives. Teachers should let students know what they are expected to learn. Next, teachers should make material as clear as they can and build upon what students already know. Third, teachers should limit the amount of time they lecture. This is not to say that some lecture is not required to explain or to share information with students; however, Walls states that teachers should lecture for no more than thirty minutes before engaging all students in some type of activity that demonstrates what they are learning. He emphasizes that "People learn what they DO."

Walls tells us that "active learning is more likely than passive learning to result in more complete acquisition and longer retention." He encourages teachers to facilitate student-centered learning, that is, teaching which focuses upon a variety of meaningful



learning activities that allow students to construct new knowledge. Teachers must let students know “by word and deed” that they care not only about the subject matter, but about every student’s learning. Additional factors are tied to Walls’ “four aces of learning.” Meaningful outcomes will occur only if students have adequate time on task. Outcomes must be specified in terms of student performance, not teacher performance.

To make the material to be learned clear, the teacher may have to provide stimulus prompts. A stimulus prompt is a cue given to the learner prior to his or her response. An appropriate stimulus should prompt understanding, not a rote response. For students to be engaged, they must participate in active responding and distributed practice. If learners are acquiring vocabulary, for example, they must do something with words, not just remember words. Distributed practice helps create multiple beginnings and multiple ends to the learning curve.

Enthusiasm consists of both immediacy and feedback. Immediacy is a physical or psychological closeness. Teachers might encourage students to talk, address them by name, engage them in conversations before and after class, provide nonverbal cues to encourage participation, move among students in a relaxed manner, and so forth. Feedback can be provided by the teacher on learner performance, can be provided by other learners, or can be provided by the environment in which students learn. In summary, learning community pedagogy is simply effective teaching strategies that all teachers should employ. Student-centered pedagogical practices lead to positive experiences for both students and teachers.

The problem with collaborative learning and group discussion, however, is that many teachers, college teachers in particular, are ill prepared to use these tools. Having taught for 30 years and having been a student for over 50 years, I have learned that many teachers teach the way they were taught. They lecture or they lead a “discussion,” in which the teacher asks questions and the students struggle to give the answers the teacher wants to hear. This way of teaching perpetuates the teaching paradigm, a much less risky approach to teaching, an approach that places the teacher at the head of the class as “the authority.” In *The Learning Paradigm College*, (2003), John Tagg contrasts the instruction paradigm with the learning paradigm. He argues that “...if what we want to emerge from our colleges is students who seek the meaning of the signs, dig for substance, seek to connect, then...” we need to model what we want our students to do (p. 349). When students see teachers working together, learning together, learning from mistakes, questioning, probing, researching, then students have a model to follow. Tagg states that “Learning, after all, is discovering that you are more than you thought you were” (p. 343). In support of learning communities as “purposeful communities of practice,” he cites the Bailey Scholars Program at Michigan State and the Gemstone Program at the University of Maryland. As rationale for such learning communities, Tagg notes that “creating ongoing communities of practice” leads students to deeper levels of learning:

When students write reflective journals or essays about their experience in the field—in internships, research, or service—they reify their formative meanings. And when they discuss those reflections, they participate in the ongoing negotiation of meaning (p. 259)

Similarly, when teachers write reflective journals and discuss their triumphs and failures with other teachers, they participate in the ongoing process of becoming learner-centered teachers.

In *Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges*, Grubb and associates seem to stress the need for community colleges in particular to be learning paradigm colleges: “There is great concern that community colleges do not serve their students well, especially those who are academically underprepared, low-income students, minority students, or older students....” They continue, “In an institution as varied as the community college, there’s bound to be a great deal of innovation.” Community colleges do not face the “constraints of research and academic tradition” that might hamper innovation at universities. Community colleges do not face a national wave of dissatisfaction or pressure to reform, as do K-12 institutions, and recent federal legislation has dumped billions of dollars into higher education without mechanisms to monitor the quality of education. Reform movements in community colleges are the result of local efforts. Greater interest has been expressed in constructivist and student-centered teaching, but there has been no centralized movement to change teaching. Colleges have increased the number of computers on campuses but have not paid much attention to how faculty use them. Some faculty have formed learning communities, primarily through linked courses, but such initiatives have been limited outside the Pacific Northwest, despite promotion by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. All too often, those who are trying to create the learning paradigm college struggle to promote innovation, without adequate resources. Far too many teachers continue to teach the way they themselves were taught:

Instructors experimenting with small groups or computer networks teach next to colleagues who continue to lecture, experimental learning communities draw small numbers of enthusiastic students while the rest of a college continues teaching as usual, and a few colleges support instruction through all their institutional resources while others pay little attention (pp.245-246).

Grubb adds that discussion seems to be the dominant way that many instructors try to balance lecture, but all too often, “halting conversations” simply provide an opening in a traditional lecture. He states, “the kinds of questions instructors pose and the ways they prepare students for discussion are crucial to a student-centered classroom” (p. 246). When teachers are involved with each other as a community of learners, however, the inexperienced and insecure instructors can learn effective student-centered pedagogy from those who are more experienced.

In “College Classrooms of the Future,” McDaniel states that students must not be thought of “...as empty pitchers or blank slates, [but] as part of a group that cooperate, ...as intrinsically motivated and talented contributors to a process of education instead of passive receivers of already determined ‘content.’” Teachers in the college classroom of the future will include “...appropriate learning experiences that are enjoyable and provide an atmosphere that enhances mastery and student power in the learning process.” Teachers and students “...will develop professional-personal relationships that encourage students to take risks, experiment, and rely on their own judgments in classroom discussions and activities.”

To combat resistance to innovation, innovators must find allies. One person cannot initiate a learning community movement. One person cannot transform a teaching paradigm college into a learning paradigm college. In *The Hero's Journey: How Educators can Transform Schools and Improve Learning*, Brown and Moffett note that “a vast and untapped source of professional knowledge lies within each school in the form of the collective craft knowledge of its teachers” (p. 8). They explain that mythic heroes had to face trials and tests but also had to exhibit the fortitude to “stay the course”: “the heroes realize that these trials are a necessary and inevitable part of their personal growth and transformation” (p. 9). The hero can be an individual educator, a school, or a school system. Evolving into a student-centered teacher or a learning paradigm college requires clarity of vision, a methodical approach, and unwavering fortitude:

In equipping the learner—whether a student, teacher, administrator, or parent/community member—with the capacity for developing and demonstrating lifelong habits of mind, the heroic school must ultimately become an inclusive community of lifelong learners—a community characterized by academic rigor, professional excellence, and extraordinary caring for the welfare of each [student] it serves (p. 9). The hero's journey is present in all educational settings when the power of shared inquiry and commitment overcomes despair and leads to possibility and hopefulness (p. 13).

Both students and teachers can benefit immensely from the possibilities and hopefulness provided by learning communities.

### **Learning Community Impact on Students:**

Goodsell (1993) conducted a qualitative case study to attempt to understand, through the students' point of view, how participation in Freshman Interest Groups influenced their learning experiences, and how those learning experiences fit in with their broader experiences as first-year students. In her unpublished dissertation, *Freshman Interest Groups: Linking Social and Academic Experiences of First-Year Students*, she discusses data gathered during observations and interviews. She made three one-week site visits during the second and last week of classes in the fall quarter, and the middle week of the spring quarter, 1991-1992. She acted as a participant observer in twelve classrooms and conducted forty-three interviews with twenty-four students. Her results focus upon students' social interactions in college, students' views of the academic experience, and students' views of learning. She found that much of the influence of FIGs was in social relationships among students and that social interactions formed a social context within which learning occurred.

The students' view was that large classes and the use of lecture style of teaching created alienation, distance, and detachment. Students reacted to these conditions by sitting passively in classes, skipping classes, and buying notes for classes. While students seldom spoke of the content of their courses, they viewed learning as collecting information, as related to talking, and as related to grades (which indicated whether information had been collected correctly).

Some students indicated they “learned better when they were able to relate class information to personal experiences and talk about them with their peers.” Goodsell sees her study as “focusing on the perceptions of students engaged in collaborative learning

[that] can inform the practice of teaching in higher education. She notes that while “professors have written much about what collaborative learning is and how to implement it, ...very little has been written about the experiences of students from their point of view” and that, all too often, “Evaluations of collaborative learning...tend to be surveys about student satisfaction or teacher preparedness” and that “the results paint a generally positive picture of collaborative learning.” Goodsell contends that educational researchers should be interviewing students to understand how collaborative learning experiences shape their learning. She maintains that “collaborative learning strategies allow for a synergy to develop which can empower students to find that their whole college experience is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Her study was a descriptive study of the FIG experience, not a program evaluation. She used data analysis to explore themes as they emerged. Her conclusions are that “implementation of collaborative learning strategies takes collaborative planning and collaborative doing” and that “institutions looking to reform practice in and out of the classroom for the purpose of increasing student achievement and retention can use models of collaborative learning such as Freshman Interest Groups.” She adds that “FIGs provide insight into ways that students integrate their social and academic lives, experience the academic environment, and think about learning” (p. 177).

*Supportive Communication: An Investigation of the Effects of the Freshman Interest Group Program on Perceptions of Support and College Adjustment*, an unpublished dissertation by Claire Frances Sullivan (1991, University of Washington) indicates that significant differences were found between two groups on four of five functions of support (emotional, instrumental, informational, and motivational). Sullivan writes that “Findings suggest that students in the traditional academic structure are satisfied with the support provided by students outside the classroom setting, whereas FIG (Freshman Interest Group) participants are satisfied with support from both classmates and other students on campus.” According to Sullivan’s findings, the environment for students in freshman learning communities enhanced supportive communication, but freshmen at the University of Washington adjusted well to college life regardless of the supportive academic environment they encountered during their first academic term.

Sullivan explains that the purpose of the freshman interest group program at the University of Washington is to ease the transition from high school to college life. Each FIG consists of 20 to 25 students. The purpose of her study was to examine the effect of supportive interpersonal relationships on college adjustment, formed as a result of student participation in the FIG program, versus the traditional academic environment, and to provide information that might benefit both theorists and future institutional policy makers.

She cites a study by Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) that found the single most important type of contact to be discussions of intellectual and course-related materials. Their conclusion was that “‘Informal academic achievement and intellectual development are those that extend the intellectual content of the curriculum into students’ non-classroom lives.’”

To obtain data for her study, Sullivan asked freshmen to complete a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the quarter. Her analysis sample consisted of 119 FIG participants and 46 non-FIG freshmen. Students were asked to rate their expected

number of contacts of 10 minutes or more per week with faculty. Results ranged from a high of 32 percent of FIG participants expecting three or more such contacts, to a low of 4.2 percent expecting no contact. Non-FIG student expectations ranged from a high of 19.2 percent to a low of 8.7 percent. She found no significant difference in student views on the importance of graduating from college. Interestingly, Sullivan found that 10.6 percent of the non-FIG group withdrew from one or more courses during the quarter compared to 5.9 percent of the FIG sample, and that 8.5 percent of the non-FIG group received academic warnings while no students in the FIG group received such warnings. She found that freshmen at the University of Washington seem to adjust “quite well, regardless of the academic environment encountered during their first year”; however, Sullivan admits her study is limited in that it focused only upon the first quarter of the academic year.

In “The Challenge of Learning Communities as a Growing National Movement” (2001), Smith, who was co-director of the National Learning Communities Project at Evergreen State College, states that a notable characteristic of the learning community movement is that it has often joined forces with other educational reform efforts that promote active learning and “deep learning.” During a workshop titled, “From First Year to Capstone Learning Community Models,” conducted at the 2002 learning communities conference in Atlanta, Oates defined “deep learning” as having several characteristics. It is learning for life. It is integrative or connected learning. It is learning that matters because it connects to issues and topics that are important to students in that it links subject matter to their lives. It is learning that has rigor. Students feel free to create new knowledge, to make mistakes with ideas.

In answering the question, “Why learning communities?” Oates stated that learning communities promote curricular coherence, and encourage citizenship and work force development. They improve retention rates and reflect a high rate of student satisfaction with learning experiences.

Smith writes that “Many schools are targeting learning communities on developmental education since this is a graveyard for too many students” (2001, p. 8). In “How learning communities affect students,” in the same AAC&U issue of *PeerReview*, Shapiro and Levine cite a study conducted at Temple University in 1996. They found that learning community participants were retained at a rate 5 percent higher than a comparison group of non-participants. A similar study at the University of Missouri, Columbia, in 1995, showed a one-year retention rate of 87 percent among learning community participants compared to 81 percent for non-participants. A three-year longitudinal study showed a 12 percent higher retention rate.

Researchers at Daytona Beach Community College measured participants’ cognitive development using Knefelkamp and Widick’s measure of intellectual development. Students wrote three essays over the course of the academic year in response to questions on classroom learning, decision making, and career plans. The researchers compared the essays at the beginning and end of fall term, and from the beginning of fall term to the end of winter term. As measured on the Perry scale of intellectual development, 76% of the students experienced a change of 1/3 position or more, 50% progressed 2/3, and 10.5% progressed a full position or more on the scale. In short, students in the interdisciplinary learning community showed greater intellectual development than students in traditional classes. Shapiro and Levine cite a survey at the

University of Southern Maine indicating learning community students are more likely to become involved in student activities and campus life. Another survey at the University of Wisconsin showed that learning community students reported greater satisfaction with the first-year experience than did non-participants (Smith, 2001).

### **Learning Community Impact on Teachers**

While the purpose of this study is not to examine the impact of learning communities on teachers, it is important to note that this is an important area of study. A review of literature suggests that such a study at Garrett College may provide encouragement for teachers to become involved in the learning community movement. In addition, such a study may encourage teaching reform among teachers who adhere to the traditional lecture mode of teaching. A number of writers claim that teachers who participate in learning communities tend to develop more positive attitudes toward their students and toward teaching, and are more willing to take risks by changing their teaching methods. In "Networks as Learning Communities: Shaping the Future of Teacher Development," Lieberman notes that one of the problems with teacher preparation has been the "development of teachers by outside 'experts'" rather than by teachers themselves. She states that conditions to support teacher learning exist in few schools, and that minimal conditions should include teachers talking to each other about their work, opportunities for teachers to visit each others' classrooms, time for teachers to comment on each others' work, and time to develop common standards for student work. Networks allow teachers to become members of a community in which they are valued as members who create as well as receive knowledge.

Larrivee (2000) writes in "Creating Caring Learning Communities" that teachers and students must develop fundamental values of open and honest communication, mutual vulnerability, significant commitment to each other, and collective responsibility for sustaining a community. Teachers should communicate respect, be authentic, be thoughtful and encourage thoughtfulness, have emotional integrity, and create a sense of community.

Lenning and Ebbers (1999) argue that learning communities naturally provide for professional development. Such development occurs when school staff members work together to foster collective learning. The small group process creates an atmosphere in which people listen to each other and an atmosphere in which it is safe to take risks. Such an environment empowers individuals and creates a sense of community.

Gross and Kientz (1999) argue in "Collaborating for Authentic Learning" that "excellent teachers working in isolation can't improve student learning as much as teachers working collectively to create professional communities." In addition, they claim that "when adults collaborate, they learn more, work harder, support one another emotionally, and commit to cumulative efforts and effects."

Finkel (2000) encourages teachers to work with a colleague as a means of learning from each other and encourages reflection as a way of monitoring the success and failure of our teaching experiences. In his book, *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*, he emphasizes Dewey's claim that reflecting on experiences is the only way we can learn. He states that when students are required to read books, the books should speak for themselves and that the students should do the talking about the books. Students and teachers should engage in mutual inquiry. The art of writing enables teachers to speak with their mouths shut. Teachers' writing in response to student writing, response that is

directed to the individual is more effective than lecture directed to the whole class. He reminds readers that telling as a way of learning just does not work.

In “Developing the Faculty We Need,” Oates (2001) writes, “the training for and experience of a learning community can have a powerful impact on how a faculty member teaches any class, thinks about learning and scholarship, and interacts with the rest of the academic community.” She notes that, to help achieve curricular coherence, faculty have to learn about courses and subjects outside their disciplines, and they have to spend considerable time collaborating with others outside their fields of expertise. She emphasizes that while all teachers should be knowledgeable and self-reflective about the learning process, it is especially important in learning communities because of the fundamental aspects of collaborative learning and group work in learning communities. Faculty must recognize and build upon their differences, realizing that multiple perspectives can enrich learning for both faculty and students.

### **Summary and Conclusion:**

The national learning community movement is a product of history. It attempts to build upon the progressive education movement, the Tech Prep movement, and collaborative, active learning. According to available literature, learning communities positively impact student cognitive abilities, academic achievement, retention, interpersonal relations, and adjustment to college.

Faculty interested in forming a learning community can choose from a variety of models. MacGregor (2000) discusses a number of options in “Learning Community Models.” Linked or paired courses are generally courses for which students co-register. Faculty coordinate their syllabi but teach their classes separately.

The learning community which is the focus of this study blends characteristics of freshman interest groups and course clusters, as discussed in detail in chapter three. Data gathered from and about students determine the degree of success of the endeavor, and chart the direction of curricular reform at Garrett College. This data will aid faculty, staff, and administration in determining the role learning communities will play, and may provide data that will assist other educators in determining whether learning communities are another educational fad or a tool for meaningful educational reform.

## Chapter Three

### **The Pilot Study:**

As a precursor to this study and as a course requirement for Curriculum and Instruction 791, Qualitative Research, I conducted a pilot study of a learning community experience provided to a small group of students at Garrett College during the 2000-2001 school year. In the fall of 2001, I interviewed five students who had participated in the experience.

### **Pilot Sample:**

To obtain a variety of views concerning the learning community experience, I chose a cross-section of students who had participated in the pilot learning community experience. These students were no longer in any class that I teach, nor could they enroll in any class that I will teach in the future at Garrett College. I interviewed one female student and four male students. Two of the male students earned C's in the learning community classes. One of the young men (an athlete) did not enroll in college until two years after his high school graduation. The other (not an athlete) is painfully shy. A third male student (also an athlete) passed his fall classes but failed his spring classes because of poor attendance and lack of effort. The fourth male student is an athlete but chose not to participate in college sports. He plans to become a teacher and earned A's in the learning community classes. Only one female student was interviewed because, of the three female students who had participated in the learning community experience, she was the only one available. She earned A's and B's in her learning community classes.

### **Pilot Setting:**

During fall semester, 2000, I taught all the learning community classes: English 101, Speech 101, English 98 (a developmental course designed to complement English 101), and freshman orientation. During spring semester, I taught English 102, which is a blend of composition II and an introduction to literature, while another instructor taught sociology. The theme used to connect the courses was "In Search of Social Justice." The courses were simply linked thematically. The other instructor and I had no integrated assignments and engaged in no team teaching. Having several courses taught by one instructor within the learning community is not reflected in any model described in the literature. It was, however, the only way I could initiate the learning community movement at Garrett College, and it did allow me to conduct an initial pilot and to explore the possibility of getting other teachers interested in learning communities.

### **Pilot Data:**

Sixteen of the eighteen students who participated in the learning community returned to Garrett to begin the fall semester of their sophomore year. One of the non-returnees transferred to a college in eastern Maryland. While the second did not return for fall classes, he did re-enroll the following spring. All eighteen students passed all learning community classes in the fall semester with a C or better in each class.

My interviews with the five representative students consisted of open-ended questions. I asked students to describe how they learn best, to define the term learning community, to describe any effects learning community participation may have had on



them, to discuss both positive and negative effects of the learning community experience, and to share their perceptions of an ideal learning community.

All five students seemed to value collaborative learning. All seemed to have a clear definition of what a learning community is and how it is meant to help them; however, their definitions closely mirrored the experiences of the one learning community in which they had participated. All students noted satisfaction with the academic and social aspects of the learning community. None was willing to make changes to the learning community design.

While all students indicated an appreciation of the connections made among courses, one student said he would have liked to have had more teachers involved. All complained about the lack of connections between literature and sociology during the spring semester. While I attempted to follow the sociology teacher's syllabus and observed her class twice in an attempt to help students make connections, we did not meet to plan collaboratively, to discuss assessment, or to create integrated assignments. Factors such as problems with scheduling meetings, family, and time spent commuting to work prevented our collaboration.

### **Conclusions of the Pilot:**

While students valued their learning experience and the retention rate was 100 percent, inadequate planning for the learning community experience, lack of communication between teachers involved, and inadequate data collection seemed to prevent the learning community pilot from being the success it might have been. It was only vaguely designed to resemble any national model and was not a model for other researchers to replicate; however, it did serve a valuable purpose. Student achievement was excellent, and the pilot served as an incentive for a number of endeavors that I have undertaken:

- to engage in research,
- to design more effective learning community experiences for both students and teachers,
- to involve other faculty,
- to improve data collection,
- to collect data from multiple sources to allow for triangulation,
- to provide teachers and researchers a model that might be replicated.

These factors led to the purpose of my study.

### **Purpose of the Case Study:**

From 1998 through 2001, I experimented with pilot projects, read numerous publications, attended conferences, and completed graduate course projects and assignments in ways that allowed me to focus on learning communities. I wondered if learning communities, not experiments, but well-planned learning communities, could make a difference at Garrett College. I intuitively believed they could, but I needed evidence.

Many educators agree that learning occurs within a social context and that active learning opportunities benefit students more than do passive learning experiences. Many of these same educators have begun to re-examine the theories of Dewey and other progressive educators in search of a more effective pedagogy to address the needs of students in twenty-first century schools. As I explained briefly in Chapter One, the national learning community movement is gaining momentum because educators

visualize it as a tool for synthesizing social, active, and collaborative learning. Those involved in the learning community movement have called for studies to examine the effectiveness of this type of learning experience, as well as an examination of the components of learning communities that seem to be effective for both students and teachers. Scores of articles and books have been written about the theory of learning communities, and a number of related studies have been conducted. Longitudinal studies that triangulate information from multiple sources within learning communities seem to be somewhat scarce. This chapter explains how my study will add to the body of literature on learning communities, and how the perspectives of students involved in the learning community experience studied will add to this field of knowledge.

Patton (2002) writes that qualitative methods are used in both research and evaluation: “Program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future programming” (p. 10) While this is a mixed methods study, much of the data gathered is qualitative because qualitative methods “tell the program’s story by capturing and communicating the participants’ stories” (p. 10).

### **Setting for the Case Study:**

In *Research in Education and the Behavioral Sciences: Concepts and Methods*, Mason and Bramble (1997) discuss “Modes of Research and the Scientific Method.” They note that quantitative research uses measurement and statistics, a method I believed would have limited value in reporting how learning community experiences affect students. Qualitative research however deals with “observations, impressions, and interpretations,” (p. 38), a method my pilot study had shown would allow flexibility in research and an opportunity for student voices to be heard. A case study can involve “in-depth consideration of one ... group...” and involve a researcher who is “interested in understanding a condition so that it can be treated or altered in some way” (p. 39) I knew that I would have to function as participant observer in order to work with students on a regular basis, to follow their progress, and to get to know each on an individual basis. Mason and Bramble note that case and field research “tend to be studies of phenomena as they exist in the natural setting” (p. 41). For several years I have wanted to establish a learning community program. Informal conversations with Garrett College faculty and administrators had led me to believe that if I could conduct credible research and show higher rates of academic achievement and retention while working with students in what I believed should be a natural setting, more educators at Garrett College would become interested in “the powerful potential of learning communities.”

Garrett College is a very small commuter institution located in rural western Maryland. Students are at risk for a number of reasons. A high percentage of students enrolling in the college are first-generation college students, are economically disadvantaged, and are required to enroll in one or more developmental English and math courses. Many choose to enroll in the two-year college to prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university, while others seek two-year certificates or degrees to improve their chances of gaining satisfactory employment. Many out-of-state students enroll at Garrett primarily for the opportunity to be involved in collegiate sports, but intense athletic schedules often lead them to academic failure, followed by suspension from the activity they love. I have known of students who slept in their cars for the opportunity to

attend college, and I have known women who attended class despite threats, intimidation, and physical abuse from their husbands. While Garrett has students who are from traditional, supportive families, and students who are prepared to achieve academic excellence, the institution does serve a number of students for whom the college is the last ray of hope for a better life.

Garrett College is a natural site for this study because I am employed there as a full-time English teacher, because of my interest in learning communities, and because the college administration supports the concepts of active, collaborative learning, as well as the concept of learning communities.

To offer a learning community experience for this study, I had to offer courses within the regular schedule, recruit other faculty members to work with me on a voluntary basis, recruit students to enroll on a voluntary basis, meet the required enrollment for designated courses, and incur no additional expenses for the college. In essence, I could design a learning community experience as long as the project incurred no expense for the college and did not impact teaching loads. I recruited my colleague who had gone to Miami with me. He agreed to designate one of his computer classes for the learning community. I recruited my office partner, and he agreed to designate a speech class. I designated a freshman English class and a developmental English class. I asked to teach a freshman orientation course as a teaching overload. The cohort was pure in the computer, speech, freshman composition, and orientation courses. Those students who also placed into the remedial English course were in an impure cohort for that class only since just a few of them placed into English I and the supportive remedial class. My colleagues and I met to coordinate our syllabi, to plan the semester experience, and to illustrate how learning communities can be implemented at no additional costs.

Freshman interest groups are learning communities consisting of courses linked thematically. To that extent, our learning community was a FIG. None of us had time to function as a mentor to help students connect learning across the curriculum, and we could not afford to hire a mentor, so I functioned as the unofficial mentor in English and in the orientation class. Course clusters consist of three or more courses, so to that extent, our learning community was a course cluster.

### **Participants:**

Students who enrolled in learning community classes reflect the student body at large. This cohort included a number of athletes, both male and female students, and a small percentage of African-American students, reflecting the school's predominantly Caucasian ethnography. Students enrolled in the learning community which is the basis for this study initially included three African-American males, two of whom played basketball; four Caucasian females, none of whom were athletes, and 12 male students of European ancestry. Of these 12, eight were baseball players, and one is a world-class cyclist. One of the 12 comes from a Mennonite family. I expected him to be ultra-conservative and to wear his religion on his sleeve, metaphorically speaking. Surprisingly, he was just the opposite.

All but one of the students were first semester college freshmen. One student transferred from a university in Virginia, following poor academic achievement while there. Advisers recommended that students enroll in the learning community, but enrollment was voluntary; however, students who did enroll were expected to remain in the learning community (hence, in the study) for at least one academic year.

The make-up of the cohort changed slightly with the beginning of spring semester. One African-American student had a scheduling conflict with an advanced math class and could not enroll in the second English class. This English course and a cultural geography course kept the cohort intact, but spring courses were not linked. The student involved in cycling withdrew for spring training. To meet the college mandate for enrollment, students who were not in the original cohort, three males and one female, were permitted to enroll in English and cultural geography for the spring semester. While English 101 is typically capped at 18, English 102 is capped at 25. Since, the cohort became impure, for the purposes of this study, only those students enrolled in the fall learning community cohort have been considered

**The Cohort:** (Names are fictitious to protect the identities of students.)

The following sketches are included to help the researcher recall each student as a unique individual and to help readers envision the makeup of the cohort.

**Sarah** is a young lady is from Garrett County. She was 18 years old at the time she enrolled in college. She held herself aloof from most members of the learning community and didn't seem to enjoy school. She chose to sit in the chair in the farthest corner of the room and refused to be drawn into class discussions and debates. She was an attractive blond, friendly enough, and bright. Although I tried to get her to open up, she never became as open as the other students in the cohort. She left after two semesters of course work with a GPA of 2.22.

**Dante** is a gifted, young African-American athlete from the Baltimore/Washington area. He seemed bright and often offered amazing insights to literature and people. When we discussed Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, he asked, "Why does the white visitor keep referring to the Younger family and the black race as 'you people'?" His question triggered an eye-opening discussion about racism. He had plenty of ability as an athlete and as a scholar, but he lost interest in school when he left the learning community. He scheduled several appointments to be interviewed for this study but kept none of his appointments.

**Krissy** is a perky blond from Garrett County. She kept her hair short and manageable, dressed impeccably, and seemed quite popular with the young men in the learning community. She was vivacious with the students in the learning community but didn't seem to care much for me. She was respectful and did her work, but was cool during our necessary interactions. She never said or did anything to signify distance, and I never had enough evidence to question her. At times, the smile faded from her face as she looked at me, and I just felt a distance that I could not seem to bridge. She maintained a low C average and left Garrett after 2 semesters. She did not return any voice mail requests for interviews.

**Vito** was a 19-year-old baseball player of Italian descent from Ohio. He was a charmer and was loved by everyone in the learning community. He was always dressed very well and wore designer cologne, as did all the athletes, making my classroom smell like the fragrance aisle at Bloomingdale's. I imagined every aspect of his life as methodically organized and planned—until I had the opportunity to visit the house that several of the athletes shared. Vito's room looked as if several pieces of luggage had exploded. Dirty laundry covered every piece of furniture and the entire floor. "He hasn't done laundry all semester," one of his housemates laughed. "He's waiting to take it all

home to his mother.” (This was in late November!) He did well academically, maintaining a high C/low B average. He excelled in baseball, and he was very friendly and outgoing.

**Tyrice** was gifted in academics and athletics. This 19-year-old basketball player from eastern Maryland was shy but friendly. He is African American. After graduating high school, he had enrolled in a private preparatory school in the Washington, DC area to further prepare to excel in college studies—and excel he did, not only in the classroom, but also on the basketball court. While he was warm and friendly during interactions with me, he never seemed to be quite comfortable in the small, rural confines he had come to.

**Carlo** was a 19-year-old baseball player from Ohio. Of Italian descent, he was very warm, friendly, outgoing. I welcomed his visits to my office because he always greeted me with a ready smile, a hand shake, and a pleasant remark. Any time he asked for extra assistance on an essay or with an assignment for another class, he expressed his appreciation both at the beginning and at the end of our meetings. Despite his slender, handsome appearance, he did not date while he was at Garrett. He let his classmates and several disappointed young women know that he was here for academics and athletics. He maintained a high C/low B GPA.

**Lance** was 19-year-old cyclist from West Virginia and is the former student with whom I’ve most recently spoken. He attended college because his mother wouldn’t support his cycling goals if he didn’t. He always seemed too thin because he closely watched his diet and spent so many hours training on his bike. His warm smiles often signaled a hand shake or little cubby bear hug. I smile as I recall some of our conversations because he often signaled his understanding of my comments by saying, “yeah, yeah, yeah.” He maintained a C average and was not interested in being in college. He spent some time at the Olympic Training Center, has gone to Europe to train several times, and now is in Virginia for further training.

**Jeremy** was everyone’s friend. He was a 21 year old transfer student from Virginia. He had attended a major university there but had let the social offerings cause him to completely forget about academics. He played baseball and was very popular with both male and female students. Younger students adored him. He came close to expulsion from Garrett because he was simply too attractive. During our co-curricular trip to New York, a young man who was supposed to be Jeremy’s roommate came to my room, refusing to sleep where he was supposed to. When I asked why, I received no answer, so I dressed, walked down the hall, and knocked on the door. No one wanted to open the door. After my anger erupted, someone slowly inched the door open a crack. I pushed it open farther, discovering a scantily clad, strange young woman standing in the corner. I made her get dressed and leave as all the young men in the room stood in silence. When she had gone, Jeremy asked in innocence, “Why were you so mean? She’s a nice girl, and she goes to school at Harvard.” In a voice as controlled as I could make it, I responded, “Jeremy, you are in New York, and she is a hooker!” Despite this episode, our relationship remained warm during the following semesters. He began his Garrett experience with a fall GPA of 3.28 but let his grades gradually slide after leaving the learning community. During his fourth semester of college, his parents said that they refused to pay for further schooling since his academic performance had become so poor. After two years at Garrett, he had completed only 48 credits and had let his GPA fall to 2.28. His parents told him to get a job and to support himself.

**Raphael** is an extremely shy African American student from the Baltimore/Washington area. He is very self-conscious. He earned a GPA of 2.85 for fall semester, but his grades plummeted second semester when he left the learning community. Raphael was significantly overweight and seemed to shuffle his way through life at the time I knew him. I never knew him to exhibit excitement or to become energetic about anything. His speech was soft and somewhat slurred, and he spoke almost in a monotone. He transferred to the University of Maryland at College Park for his second year of college. At the time of his interview, he explained that he had had housing and transportation problems and had returned to Garrett for further studies. He indicated that he was planning to transfer to a nearby university and was planning to become a teacher. I kept silent. I have not seen him for some time, but I worry about his future.

**Wendy** was an 18-year-old Caucasian female who seemed to crave attention. She lived with foster parents in Garrett County and had lived on the streets of a city in Ohio for a time. She struggled with a weight problem, she was overly generous, and she dearly loved everyone in the learning community. She worked at McDonald's but sometimes spent her paycheck on gifts and meals for other students. Any time she and other students made a lunch run to Burger King, she stopped by my office to ask if I would like something. Inevitably, she wanted to buy my lunch, but I always insisted on paying for my own, telling her to keep her money for her own needs. Her bright red hair and her booming voice made her easily recognizable, and other students in the learning community made a point of including her when they planned activities. When she received a B on a composition, she was all smiles. "I've never made grades this good in my entire life," she said. She maintained a C+/C GPA while in the learning community. Her grades plummeted during her second year at Garrett. When I interviewed her, she was pregnant and was arranging to live with her biological mother as a single parent.

**Paris**, an extremely shy, round-eyed Caucasian female is from Garrett County. She sometimes struggled with academics but persevered. The students and I produced a British comedy, "Black Comedy," as a fundraiser to help pay for the group's trip to New York. Paris never said much in class unless speaking was required. Her blond hair was closely cropped, and her glasses gave her the appearance of a wise little owl that occasionally blinked as she took in the world around her. I cast her in a significant role in the play. Her first response was, "I can't do this." I replied, "Yes, you can, and you have to. You're perfect for the part." Like a trooper, she learned her lines, developed her character, and astonished both friends and family with her performance, flinging her frail body about the stage as she portrayed a prim and proper old maid who has discovered the liberating influence of alcohol. Academically, Paris maintained a solid C average. At the time of our interview, she was attending a university in Maryland and planning to become a teacher.

**Abraham** was a 20-year-old Caucasian male from Garrett County. He is very bright and definitely marches to his own drum. At first, he was shy in the learning community, but became one of the most outgoing students. When I heard that a Mennonite had enrolled in the learning community, I was expecting a conservatively-dressed young man to walk through the door since the female Mennonite students at Garrett typically wear long dresses and the recognizable white caps. The tall, gangly, latter-day hippie who walked into my class had to identify himself. His long, shaggy brown hair, his sandals, and his baggy pants took me by surprise, as did his very open,

accepting views on women's rights and same-sex relationships. Abraham seemed to have the heart of a poet or an artist, but seemed to take more courses in psychology than in any other discipline. He zipped through his degree at Garrett and transferred to a major university.

**Brandon** was an 18-year-old Caucasian baseball player from Ohio. He was stocky but muscular, with a deep voice that could easily intimidate those who didn't know him. He was close to his mother and could deliver funny lines with an absolutely straight face. As we discussed appropriate costumes for the play the learning community produced and places we might locate them without incurring expense, he blurted, "I have a big ass." "No, you don't," I said. "It's just muscular because you're in sports." "It might be muscle, but it's still big," he stated with finality. Brandon remains very blunt, honest, and friendly. He earned a GPA of B in the fall semester, but his GPA fell to a C in the spring. He transferred to a college in Pennsylvania after two semesters at Garrett. At the time of his interview, he and his girl friend were sharing an apartment, and he had been academically suspended from the Pennsylvania college. He was however planning to return.

**Sean** was an 18-year-old Caucasian male from Garrett County. He loved life and his motorcycle. Traveling to New York with him was probably one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had. He was like a sponge, soaking up the culture, the atmosphere, and the diversity. He often came to my office just to talk, occasionally to make sure he was taking the proper steps to attain his goal. He wanted to be a surveyor and had spent considerable time in the field, working part time and learning. Academics seemed to challenge him, so he had been taking small, manageable steps to earn his degree, but persevering semester after semester. He maintained a solid C average. Tragically, he was killed in a motorcycle accident in what would have been his last semester at Garrett. As I looked at him in his coffin, I fondly recalled his boyish mop of blond hair, his smile, his laughter, and his thirst for life.

**Jacob** was an 18-year-old Caucasian male from Pennsylvania. He did not like school but did like playing baseball and being a part of the learning community. I prayed for a way to instill a love for learning in him, but he was quite honest in his views. More than once, he stated, "I hate school. I like you, and I like being in the learning community, but I hate school." I often responded by saying, "That's OK. Not everyone has to go to college to live well and to be happy." He was friendly and loved the social aspects of being in college, but he just didn't like going to school. He held a low C average in the first two semesters. His GPA slid to a D when he was no longer a part of the learning community. He persevered for 4 semesters, earning 44 credits. At that point, he decided that he had had enough formal schooling.

**Sabrina** was an 18-year-old Caucasian female from Garrett County. She loves acting and being with friends. She is very friendly and outgoing. She is a slender brunette with short hair that seems to fly in all directions when she is animated. She married one of Garrett's international students, allowing him to apply for U.S. citizenship. I couldn't help noticing how she beamed with pride as she sat in the audience, watching as he crossed the stage to receive his diploma. Because she had finished her degree requirements ahead of him, she continued to take classes on a part time basis beyond her degree, waiting until they could both transfer to a university. Despite lots of academic ability, she maintained a solid C average, graduating after 5 semesters at Garrett.

**Arnold** was another 18-year-old Caucasian baseball player from Pennsylvania. While I typically love all my students, he is one of my all-time favorites. Slender, with a big smile and a mop of dark hair that was usually covered with a baseball cap, he was gifted in academics and athletics. He was friendly and optimistic, often swinging by my office to make sure I was having a good day, to ask me to look over an essay, or to make sure I would attend a baseball game. He usually parted with the inevitable firm handshake, occasionally a hug. He maintained a solid C average for four semesters but could have done so much better. After earning 54 credits, he transferred to a 4-year college.

**Rick** was a 19-year-old Caucasian baseball player from West Virginia. He maintained a solid C average for two semesters at Garrett but seemed to have far too many girlfriend complications for a college freshman. He had to work hard to keep his grades up, and the house he shared with teammates had the reputation of being party central. Garrett County received too much snow and ice to suit him, and he was unhappy with his baseball experience. He said he was leaving because the baseball coach kept him on the bench too much. He later joined the Navy and is currently stationed on a battleship off the coast of Africa.

**David** was also a 19-year-old Caucasian baseball player from West Virginia. He reminded me of a muscular, soft-spoken huggy bear. He struggled to earn C's, but his learning community friends often helped him, tutoring him in math and helping him to organize and develop essays. He seemed much more comfortable talking about driving a truck, hunting, fishing, or playing baseball than talking about complex sentences and paragraph development. He maintained a solid C average for two semesters but left because he felt academics was too much of a struggle, and he didn't want to be in college. He wanted to work. He later joined the Navy, and he too is stationed on a battle ship off the coast of Africa.

### **Learning Community Procedures:**

- Identify courses that will comprise learning community.
- Identify instructors who will teach in the learning community.
- Identify the theme that will link courses.
- Schedule courses to avoid conflicts with other required courses and at such times that learning community teachers can be available.
- Publicize the learning community offerings.
- Meet with other instructors to coordinate syllabi.
- Identify days, times when learning community faculty can routinely meet to discuss student progress, problems, assignments, etc.
- Plan methods of obtaining feedback and collecting data.

The cohort of students comprising the learning community discussed in this study co-enrolled in English 101, Speech 101, Computer Science 105, and LS 101 (freshman orientation/seminar) during the fall semester 2002. They enrolled in additional courses not linked to the learning community.

I served as the instructor for English 101 and LS 101. This role allowed me to readily chart students' progress in integrated language arts throughout the year, to serve as coordinator of the learning community, and to serve as the facilitator for students to discuss the cross-curricular theme of the learning community. The Speech 101 instructor, the CS 105 instructor, and I taught our courses independently of each other but met



frequently to discuss students' progress, as well as to share thoughts on how to engage our students in active learning.

The learning community had as its theme, "Developing Global Perspectives and Understanding Our Multiple Identities." The purpose of the theme was to connect the teaching and learning that occurred within and among classes that comprised the learning community. The concept for the theme grew from Garrett College's emphasis on multiculturalism in its co-curricular program; from the college president's interest in international learning; from the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center; and from a speech delivered by Richard Guarasci to AAC&U's learning community conference attendees on April 6, 2002. Guarasci stated that international education offers students a larger view linked to a democratic education, and that the racial, ethnic, and religious diversity of the United States demands that academies prepare students to participate in diverse communities. He talked about education in an age of difference and stated that difference should not be reduced to dualisms: male/female, black/white, gay/straight. He insisted that differences are multiple, that each of us belongs to minorities and majorities; hence, we have multiple identities.

Teachers participating in the learning community that is the focus of this study are all veteran teachers committed to developing global perspectives. Each has taught for more than ten years and has developed or revised his own course syllabi.

Teachers consulted with each other while developing syllabi to focus on ways to use the theme of the learning community to help students make cross-curricular connections. Teachers participating in the learning community study agreed to attempt to practice Dr. Richard Walls' Four Aces of Effective Teaching (1999) and to lecture no more than 30 minutes without running an activity that engaged every student.

The learning community was publicized simply by listing courses in the schedule and sending a memo to advisors. Methods of collecting data are discussed in chapter four.

### **Research Questions:**

During the course of this study, I have examined data that attempts to answer the following questions about the impact of the learning community experience on students:

1. Does participation in the learning community affect student academic performance?
2. Does participation in the learning community affect student attitude toward education?
3. Does participation in the learning community affect student retention?

### **Approach to Research:**

According to the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, learning communities foster "student engagement and achievement, course completion, and persistence in college." Data gathered determines whether this holds true at Garrett College.

Because of my interest in teaching in a learning community environment, I functioned as participant/researcher and conducted a field study/case study of one language arts based learning community which began in the fall of 2002 at Garrett Community College.

I have taught in learning communities in the past but have not formally collected data, with the exception of a pilot study, which helped inform the methods for this study.

The pilot study consisted only of interviews conducted with five former students. As a result, there was no triangulation of data.

As noted by Mason and Bramble, engaging in field research and a case study allows the researcher to examine a number of phenomena in a natural setting (p. 41)—in this case, a college classroom. I knew that this case study would raise a number of questions, as listed in chapter 5, and that additional research and other methods of study might come to light during the research process. The problem earlier identified was an unacceptable attrition rate and an unacceptable level of academic performance among too many students. I also knew that this particular type of study would suggest the need for more tightly controlled research in the future. This particular case study serves as only a beginning in research needed to improve retention and academic performance of Garrett College students. This study also involves action research, which Mason and Bramble define as “research designed to uncover effective ways of dealing with real world problems” (p. 42), i.e. retention and academic performance. The study began solely as a qualitative study depending on observations and interviews. As suggested by Mason and Bramble, I later recognized the need to add quantitative data (p. 42). The case study is critical in evaluating a program at Garrett College because it helps faculty and administrators to determine whether such a program can help address the needs of the college and its students. The learning community cohort is representative of the general student population; therefore, results of the study and experiences of the cohort are likely to represent the types of results future learning communities may garner and experiences from which to build for future learning communities and case studies.

### Triangulation for this Study:

As indicated in the chart that follows, triangulation for each research question that has been posed will occur through the examination of information provided by multiple sources:

| <b>Matrix A: Research Questions and Instruments of Measurement</b>                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Question 1                                                                                                                                                                          | Question 2                                                                                                                                                                                           | Question 3                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                 | How does LC participation affect student academic performance?                                                                                                                      | How does LC participation affect student attitude toward education?                                                                                                                                  | How does LC participation affect student retention?                                                                 |
| <b>Measurements</b>                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                     |
| Interview                                                                                                                                                                                       | Students will indicate the degree of academic success they think they have had.                                                                                                     | Students will reveal what they think of the educational experiences they have had at Garrett, both in and out of the learning community, and whether they plan to continue their educations and why. | Students will indicate whether being a part of the learning community influenced their decisions to stay in school. |
| Students' Academic Files<br>(4 semesters: Fall, 2002 through Spring, 2004)                                                                                                                      | Will reveal the degree of academic success students in LC have actually had, as well as any learning disabilities or other obstacles that could have affected academic performance. | Will reveal whether students have made comments to their advisors about their educational experiences.                                                                                               | Will reveal whether students have told advisors why they have chosen to leave school or to stay in school.          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                     |
| Institutional Reports on Student Retention and Grades<br>(mean GPA for students who have completed 50+ credits at Garrett College (not transfer students) from Fall, 2002 through Spring, 2004) | Will reveal how learning community students fared in comparison to the general student population.                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Will reveal how learning community students fared in comparison to the general student population.                  |

### Data Collection Procedures:

Data collection consisted of interviews and document review. Transcripts of interviews, institutional documents on retention and mid-term deficiencies, and students' academic records have been examined. Interview questions are semi-structured and open-ended. As I conducted interviews, I noted students' body language and tone of voice, having prepared for such observations through years of experience as a speech and theater teacher. Such notations helped me to ascertain whether students were open, honest, and comfortable during the interviews. I concluded that students were forthright with their answers in each interview, sometimes making helpful suggestions for future

learning communities. I taped the interviews but also took notes as a back-up source in the event the tape recorder should malfunction.

**Document review** consisted of careful review of academic transcripts and students' files, interview transcripts, and institutional reports. A methodical review of these types of information provided details about students' academic success, their attitudes toward education, and the retention rate for the group.

### **Assumption:**

This study began with the assumption that a learning community, specifically a freshman interest group/course cluster, is an effective way to address multiple needs of first year students who are under prepared for the academic rigors of college and who may face difficulties in making the transition from high school to college. The rationale for such an assumption is outlined by Lenning and Ebberts (1999) in *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities*.

The study focuses primarily upon the academic success rates of first year students, with first year defined as students who earned fewer than 24 credits by the end of fall semester, 2002.

Because the purpose of this study is to evaluate a program, information that is vital to the institution has been gathered through a mixed methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative data. To examine the impact of the learning community experience on students, I have obtained information from those subjects who have participated and who have been directly affected. The subjects' voices are a vital component to answers for questions that have been posed. Only the subjects themselves can speak authoritatively about their thoughts, their feelings, their perceptions of themselves, and their learning. At the same time, transcripts that provide grades and enrollment records that indicate which students remained in school and whether they were full-time or part-time students also provide vital information related to issues of retention. Multiple data sources improve reliability of the study and reduce any degree of researcher bias that might occur during data analysis.

### **Data Collection Instruments:**

- Using a list of semi-structured, open-ended questions, I interviewed 15 students from the learning community cohort. Those interviewed represent both African American and Caucasian, male and female, athletes and non-athletes, the introverted and extroverted. Those who were leaving Garrett College at end of spring semester 2003 were interviewed after all grades had been submitted in May. Others were interviewed from fall 2004 through spring 2006. To conceal each student's identity, I have randomly assigned a letter of the alphabet to use in lieu of each student's name. Some students moved away from Garrett County, so locating them and arranging for interviews became more of a challenge than I had anticipated. The interview protocol is provided in the appendix.
- With student and administrative permission, I accessed students' advising files and Garrett College transcripts to determine mean and median grade point averages and the number of credits for which learning community students enrolled, including developmental credits.

### **Data Analysis Procedures:**

After interviewing each student, I transcribed each audio cassette tape. I then consulted notes I had taken to compare notes and transcription for accuracy. I then

assigned codes to portions of the data, identified emerging themes in the data, color coded them, and generated hypotheses based on these themes. In *Criteria for Evaluating A Research Plan*, Davitz and Davitz (1996) note that a researcher cannot plan discoveries but that the research method can be planned so that there is the opportunity for discovery. Such planning sometimes leads to new questions and additional hypotheses (p. 19).

Each student participating in this study was eighteen years of age or older before data collection began. Each participant has granted permission for his/her academic records to be examined as a part of this study. Students involved in this study are no longer enrolled at Garrett College. Students involved in the study were awarded grades in courses I taught them prior to the beginning of the study. These students are no longer able to enroll in any course that I teach.

## Chapter Four: Results

Interviews with students who participated in the learning community that is the subject of this study are probably more revealing than any other piece of data because questions were open ended, allowing responses to be non-structured. Students were first asked to describe how they learn best. Some students gave more than one response, but their answers were as follow:

- Through small group discussion 8
- Through visual examples 5  
(includes teacher putting notes on board and distributing handouts)
- Through auditory examples 5
- Through hands on activities 8  
(students defined as learning by doing)
- Through small group projects 1
- Through listening to lecture and taking notes 1

Although students in this study did not use the terms “collaborative learning” and “learner centered,” their responses seem to indicate that they learn best when teachers use such pedagogy and that traditional lecture is the least effective method of learning for them.

Second, students were asked to define the term, “learning community.” All students seemed to grasp the meaning of the term as defined by Gabelnick, et al (1990):  
the purposeful restructuring of the curriculum by linking or clustering courses that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community and foster more explicit connections among students, faculty, and disciplines (p. 30).

Some interesting student definitions are as follow:

- **Sarah:** “A learning community incorporates 2 or more classes and brings the subject matter together.”
- **Raphael:** “A learning community is a group of people who are put together to learn a certain topic and to learn from each other, to interact with each other.”
- **Brandon:** “A learning community is a bunch of people who all have the same classes, and in those classes you make friendships and find study partners. You sit down, study, and help each other out. The professor sets the boundaries, and the students take care of the learning.”
- **Paris:** “A learning community is like a small family away from home. There’s always someone going through the same stuff. You get to know them and trust them, so you become friends.”
- **Abraham:** “A learning community is something designed to help students cope better with change, to adjust by means of putting you with a group of people whom you stay with and form bonds with to transition to college life.”
- **Sean:** “A learning community is a group of the same kids in the same classes. The classes are all oriented around each other, and the classes go together. It’s better because you can work with each other in the classes because you know everyone.”

All students seemed to grasp the concept of a student cohort and of linking courses as a way of restructuring curriculum.

Third, students were asked to describe any impact participation in the learning community had on them. They were prompted to discuss learning opportunities, attitude toward education, opportunities to make friends, and co-curricular experiences.

### **Learning Opportunities and Academic Accomplishments:**

Every student interviewed stated that he or she had a more positive learning experience than expected, or as compared to high school or the learning experience at another college. Their words speak for themselves in the following selected responses:

- **Rick:** “Before, I didn’t like going to classes. It was boring, mostly lecture. The learning community helped with classes. They gradually got easier.”
- **Carlo:** “I used English to better my speaking skills. Being in the learning community really helped academics. You knew the teacher was always there for you, and the learning community incorporated one class into another.”
- **Wendy:** “When I got out of high school, I absolutely hated school. I thought it was a terrible thing. I love it now. I just want to go to school for the rest of my life.”
- **David:** “Being in the learning community helped open me up to how to write and how to use writing, how to become a better student and how to handle college. I was never the straight A student, but the learning community helped me to do better. It was a speak free environment. We could talk about whatever we wanted to talk about.”
- **Jacob:** “It helped me get better grades, not that it was easier, but it was easier to learn. Working with the same students and the teacher just made it easier.”
- **Raphael:** “I had just under a B. Very good. My grades before the learning community weren’t as high. I saw the same people every day, and we helped each other go over work, what we should do on certain things.”
- **Paris:** “Academics were different because you were learning, but it was fun learning. It wasn’t just hammered in to you. You were experimenting and doing things. My grades were pretty good.”

*Note: The following student was interviewed four years after his learning community experience at Garrett College. He had been attending a college in the Pittsburgh area at the time of the interview.*

- **Brandon:** I did way better in school there [at Garrett] than I am here. Here, you’re on your own, so you can’t really get together and study. I wish I was still in learning communities. It was fun. College was a lot different until I came here. I’m used to being the one that’s talking. Everything in the learning community was great. The professors were a help. The students were a help. If the professor was helping somebody, you could ask somebody else in the class to help. I wasn’t afraid to help anybody in the classroom, and I wasn’t afraid to ask for help.
- **Jeremy:** remember the learning community being open as far as getting help from other students, not cheating or anything like that, but working on papers and stuff, asking somebody to read over my work. The learning community helped me to have better grades. I did well right off the bat. I was a lot more motivated after being out of school for a year and a half. Minimum wage just wasn’t cutting it. I had goals. I wanted a higher education. Before, I would just write a paper and

turn it in. I didn't have anybody to go to. Now, I'm in school because I want to be here.

The perception of students in the learning community case study was that they had done well academically. GPA's for all 19 students in the fall 2002 cohort are listed below by rank.. The spring GPA for each student is listed to the right of the fall GPA. Again, each student is referred to by a randomly assigned letter to protect his/her identity. Twelve semester credits are considered full time at Garrett College. Athletes must enroll in at least 12 credits of coursework per semester to meet eligibility requirements. Non-athletes may enroll in fewer than 12 credits.



**Learning Community GPA Fall 2002 and Spring 2003**

| <b>Student</b> | <b>Fall 2002 GPA</b> | <b># of Credits</b> | <b>Spring 2003 GPA</b> | <b># of Credits</b> |
|----------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Abraham        | 3.70                 | 16                  | 3.79                   | 14                  |
| Tyrice         | 3.45                 | 13                  | 3.38                   | 16                  |
| Brandon        | 3.28                 | 12                  | 2.80                   | 12                  |
| Jeremy         | 3.28                 | 15                  | 3.10                   | 12                  |
| Carlo          | 3.13                 | 12                  | 2.90                   | 10                  |
| Vito           | 3.08                 | 12                  | 2.58                   | 12                  |
| Wendy          | 2.89                 | 15                  | 2.52                   | 15                  |
| Arnold         | 2.87                 | 15                  | 2.89                   | 12                  |
| Raphael        | 2.85                 | 15                  | 1.06                   | 15                  |
| Lance          | 2.80                 | 10                  | Not Enrolled           | Returned Fall       |
| Dante          | 2.80                 | 15                  | 1.47                   | 15                  |
| Sabrina        | 2.59                 | 16                  | 2.67                   | 16                  |
| Sean           | 2.59                 | 13                  | 2.48                   | 13                  |
| Sarah          | 2.50                 | 18                  | 2.22                   | 13                  |
| Rick           | 2.49                 | 12                  | 2.70                   | 12                  |
| Paris          | 2.37                 | 13                  | 2.26                   | 16                  |
| David          | 2.34                 | 12                  | 2.21                   | 12                  |
| Krissy         | 2.29                 | 10                  | 1.65                   | 12                  |
| Jessie         | 2.11                 | 12                  | 2.01                   | 12                  |

During the interview process, students could not recall their GPA's but said that they had done well academically while in the learning community. The grades on their academic records show that their perceptions were correct for fall semester, but the GPA for some students fell significantly during spring semester. The median GPA for fall was 2.80, and the mean was 2.81. The median GPA by the end of spring semester was lower, 2.00, as was the mean, 2.457. The cumulative GPA for 4 of the students rose slightly, and cumulative GPA for 12 students fell slightly. The cumulative GPA for three students fell significantly, into the D range. **Raphael** explained his dilemma during the interview:

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t be in the learning community second semester because of schedule conflicts. My adviser wanted me to take a higher level math. I struggled a lot in different classes with different people and a lot of different teachers. I didn’t do as well as I would have liked.”

**Dante** experienced the next most dramatic fall in GPA. During spring semester, he failed every class except developmental geometry. He and I set three appointments for him to be interviewed for this study, but he failed to show up all three times. I learned informally that he stopped attending classes but have never had the opportunity to discover the cause. He returned to Garrett College for a third semester and again failed all but one class. After that, he returned to the college a few times for informal visits but never again enrolled.

**Krissy** did not return after spring semester. Other students told me that she had gotten a job and that she had enrolled at another college. I left approximately eight voice messages for her, asking for an interview, but I have had no contact with her since spring of 2003.

**Lance** left college to train for world class cycling. He returned part time the following fall but withdrew again to train at the Olympic Training Center.

Six of the 12 students who experienced a slight decline in GPA were baseball players with a rigorous spring schedule. An informal perusal of students' records show that their lowest grades during spring semester were earned in cultural geography, psychology, upper level math, and, ironically for athletes, personal health and fitness.

The Garrett College Office of Institutional Research tracked 139 full time students who entered in the fall of 2002. Of those 139, 111 had earned 10 or more credits by the end of spring term, 2004. Thirteen of the original 19 students who enrolled in the learning community cohort are included in the 111. Of those tracked by the institution and earning 10 or more credits, the mean GPA for the learning community cohort is 2.65. The mean GPA for the other 98 from the general population is 2.50

### **Attitude toward Education:**

The next subtopic students discussed as part of the interview question about the impact of the learning community addressed their attitude toward education. Some of their statements also reveal their attitudes about persistence:

- **Raphael**, who could not participate in the learning community during spring semester, said, "My drive to stay in school would not have been as strong without the learning community. I have not been as motivated without the learning community. That whole semester was just perfect inside the community and outside the classroom."
- **Jeremy**, a student athlete who had failed to perform well in academics at a four-year college prior to registering at Garrett, noted, "My attitude toward school has definitely changed. I'm still here because I like it. I like the teachers. I like the people for the most part that I've been in classes with. I built good friendships in the learning community."
- **Paris**, an introverted female from Garrett County, said, "I liked school better when I was in the learning community. It was easier to go and see the same people and talk to them. Had I not been in the learning community, I would have come close to dropping out—or at least thought about it. The learning community was fun, and I got to meet people. We were like a little family."
- **Arnold**, a baseball player, persisted at Garrett College for 4 semesters, completing 54 credits. During his fourth semester, he talked to me informally about trying to do well in baseball and maintain his academic standing. During his final semester at Garrett, he earned one B and three F's, which dropped his GPA from 2.87 fall semester 2002 to 2.08 at the end of four semesters. He planned to transfer to a 4 year college. While he did not return to finish his degree, he did have thoughts about his learning community experience: "The learning community was 100 percent helpful. The things we learned stuck with me. The learning community convinced me to come back to Garrett a second year. It made Garrett seem like a big family. It helped me get my grades up, I liked school much more, and I enjoyed going to class much more. I was confident about school work."
- **Sabrina**, an outgoing young woman from Garrett County, stated, "I wanted to be in college, so I wasn't going to drop out, but the learning community certainly changed my attitude toward learning. I have a better outlook on college. I couldn't imagine

coming to college and not being in a learning community. In the learning community, I learned to balance social life and academics.”

- **Jacob**, a baseball player who attended Garrett primarily to play baseball, confessed, “I personally don’t like school. The learning community helped me stay focused and get my work done. The learning community played a big role in my being here. It made me stick around and want to come back this year.” Jacob did persist at Garrett for 4 semesters, completing 50 credits with a GPA of 1.69.

Only 2 of the 15 students interviewed indicated that they would have seriously considered dropping out of college during their first year. Eighteen of the 19 students in the learning community did remain in school for their second semester. In fairness, I must note however that 8 did not return for a second year at Garrett. By contacting parents and grandparents, I learned that 2 of the 8 eventually joined the Navy. The other 6 enrolled at other colleges. Four years after their initial learning community experience, only 2 students that I know of have finished 4-year degrees. Some are still persisting, but I have no formal way of tracking where most of the students have gone or what they are doing.

### **Social Interaction:**

As indicated in the literature review, learning communities often allow students to develop social ties. Every student in the case study cited the importance of such ties, often citing an appreciation for the opportunity to make friends outside their own race, culture, or subculture.

**Lance**, a student referred to earlier, the world class cyclist, made the following statements about his learning community experience:

I’m a bit introverted, and the idea of working with a group was scary, but within a short time, the whole class was connected. I was forced into the friendship situation. It brought me back to good times with others as in earlier years of education. The Olympic Training Center, where I’ve spent two years, needs something modeled on the learning community. It’s too easy to just stay with my group.

**Raphael**, another male student who defined himself as an introvert, claimed, “Coming to Garrett was a relief compared to high school. Academically and socially, I got a fresh start, a positive start. It was the first group I actually bonded with a little bit.”

**Jacob**, a baseball player, stated, “Everything in the learning community was great. The professors were a help. The students were a help. You developed friendships.”

**Jeremy**, another athlete, noted, “I recommend the learning community, especially for people who are shy, not open to meeting other students. When you’re put in the situation where you get help, you feel comfortable. It will help a lot of kids who need interaction.”

**Paris**, the most introverted young woman in the learning community, whom I persuaded to be in a play produced by the cohort, is enthusiastic about her experience: “I made friends and worked on projects. It was fun. It was people of different beliefs and backgrounds. That made it really exciting to figure out what was going to happen each day. Maybe you should do more plays. Everyone should experience a learning community. Maybe this isn’t so bad to bring us all together. We’re not so different.”

**Arnold**, yet another athlete, had the following to say: “Friendship is a part of it. My friends are just like me. They would like it and benefit from it just as much as I did.”

**Abraham**, the young Mennonite, not only earned the highest GPA in the learning community, but may also have blossomed most:

I was apprehensive because I had signed up, got there, and saw people I thought I wouldn't have a connection with. I thought I wouldn't fit in. I was bummed about it, but as time went on, the barriers dropped. I got to know people I normally wouldn't have. I came to appreciate them as friends, especially in speech class. Knowing it was the same people in all my classes made it easier to get in front of them and give speeches. The best thing I experienced was learning to be friends with people who may be totally different.

**Co-curricular activities** may also have helped students in the cohort. In November, we produced a British play, "Black Comedy." It was strictly amateur, but students seemed to have fun as they tried to cultivate British accents and rehearse the slapstick aspects of the show. Every student in the learning community was involved, either as an actor or in some technical capacity; however, no student in the learning community would agree to play the gay character, so I recruited a student from another class. Garrett County is known for its snow storms, and we had one the night of performance. Despite the storm, parents drove for hours to see their sons and daughters on stage, and a number of students also braved the storm to attend. It was the first time on stage for the student actors. The mother of the most introverted female student asked, "How did you ever get her to do that?" I explained that the learning community provided a support system, so students were more willing to take risks. That December, I sponsored a trip to New York, another first for learning community students who went on the trip. In the spring, we traveled with the art department to Washington, where we spent the day seeing as much of the Smithsonian as we could. **Abraham** was so enthralled that he made the trip again the next day to visit more museums. Only three students mentioned co-curricular activities during interviews, but throughout the school year, I overheard others talking about all three activities as exciting, enriching, and fun.

### **Student Recommendations:**

When asked if there were any negative aspects to the learning community, what improvements they would make, and how they would design an ideal learning community, some students declined to make any comments at all. Several did however make suggestions for improving the learning community experience. Their comments have been paraphrased:

- **Rick:** Get people who have a lot in common. Have a lot of group discussion. Get everyone involved.
- **Sabrina:** I wish we could have gotten to know each other even better. Some people were too shy.
- **Vito:** Make sure the teachers are on the same level. Instructors should sit down and talk it out. Allow for more student input to help make the classes relate more to each other.
- **Paris:** I would like to be in a learning community for all my classes.
- **David:** You need to have a variety of teachers so students are exposed to different teaching styles. You need more group work, more partners, more discussions.
- **Raphael:** Find ways to avoid schedule conflicts.
- **Sean:** Set it up where everybody is in the same major.

- **Jeremy:** Don't have computer class as part of a learning community. We each just sit in front of our computers, and we don't get to interact with each other.
- **Abraham:** Make the group even more diverse, different personalities, different races, really diverse.

To end on a positive note, I quote **Jacob**, who said, "I personally don't like school." After 2 years at Garrett, he had decided that college was not for him and that he was planning to get a job. While he was blunt about not liking school, of his learning community experience, he said, "I wouldn't change anything. It was everything it could have been."

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

As noted in chapter 2, A Review of Literature, learning communities are not a new concept. This is not a fad or a new buzz word that will disappear within the next five or ten years. New life has been breathed into a modified version of progressive education, best practices of traditional education, Kilpatrick's child-centered theory, and Dewey's call for "continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned" (p. X). Learning communities are about collaboration, student-centered learning, and making connections across the curriculum. They are also about making social connections. American education need not be and is not a wasteland. The learning community movement has spread to over 500 American colleges and universities within the last three decades. Bruner argued that every child is capable of learning; learning communities advocate more effective teaching and deeper levels of learning for every student. MacGregor, Matthews, Smith, Gabelnick, Malnarich, Lardner, and many other educators have devoted huge chunks of their lives to the advocacy of learning communities. Bailey advocates multidisciplinary scrutiny of information in the quest for knowledge. Walls, Bean, and others advocate active learning. Bielaczyc and Collins argue the attributes of collaborative research. Lenning and Ebbers tout the "essence of higher education" as "learning and collaboration." Tagg advocates modeling what we want our students to do, a key characteristic of the learning paradigm college, and Grubb and associates stress the need for community colleges to be learning paradigm colleges. Every one of these researchers and writers champion learning communities because they offer effective ways for teachers to engage students in learning—not taking multiple choice quizzes that test retention of trivia, but deep, meaningful learning.

Goodsell's case study shows that Freshman Interest Groups, one type of learning community, influence first-year students' learning experiences and that large classes and lecture style teaching create alienation, distance, and detachment. Her study suggests that students in learning communities engage in collaborative learning and that they help students relate what they are learning to personal experiences.

Sullivan's findings show that participation in Freshman Interest Groups enhance supportive communication and help students to adjust well to college. Oates finds that learning communities promote deep learning, and researchers at Daytona Beach Community College find that learning community participation actually promotes intellectual development. Shapiro and Levine cite surveys that show students in learning communities report greater satisfaction with their first-year college experience.

Narratives gleaned from interviews with students who participated in the learning community experience at Garrett College and institutional records seem to show results similar to findings at other colleges. The students in the learning community case study experienced a higher rate of academic success than the general student population, and a much higher percentage of learning community students was retained. The cohort observed and interviewed in this case study seems to validate the Garrett College learning community initiative as a worthwhile educational experience. Fifteen of the 19 students who participated in the learning community, 79% of the cohort, were interviewed. All 15 students persisted in their education at Garrett College for at least 2 semesters. All 15 perceived the learning community experience as a positive influence on their academic

performance and social adjustment to college. Also of significant note is the fact that almost all the students in the learning community said that they learn best when learning is student-centered and collaborative, that they like the concept of linking courses, and that such linkage, and being part of a cohort, make learning easier and more fun.

### **What the study does not do:**

This study serves merely as one small step in creating a learning community initiative at Garrett College.

- It does not account for effects on teachers who teach in learning communities.
- It does not include vignettes that illustrate types of lessons included in the learning community or how students responded to those lessons.
- It does not include teacher notes or reflections on classroom activities.
- It does not accurately compare responses of learning community students to responses of students in the general population, nor does it compare responses to those of a control group.
- It does not measure the learning that occurs.

Future research should address each of these factors. To gain additional data, teachers who are involved in learning communities must become actively involved in research. Suggestions for more complete and more accurate assessment are discussed later in this chapter.

### **What this study does:**

- It provides a beginning, a small foundation on which faculty and administration can build for more effective learning and better rates of retention in future learning communities.
- It serves as a rationale for launching a learning community initiative.
- It highlights the need for a learning community coordinator and the Institutional Office of Research to systematically gather statistically significant data on student satisfaction, student retention, and student academic successes and failures. This data can be used to further define the mission of the college and methods of achieving that mission.
- It highlights the need for more collaborative, activity-based, experiential, student-centered instruction at Garrett College.
- It allows student voices to be heard, voices that must be heard if Garrett College is to become a truly “learner centered” institution.

### **Program Recommendations:**

- If Garrett College is to launch a sustainable learning community initiative, it must provide the time and resources for a coordinator to conduct research and to report research findings. Course release time and/or a summer stipend for compiling data may be possible approaches.
- As indicated by students, more teachers must become involved in the learning community movement.
- As suggested by students, some learning communities should be designed for students in a major field of study; others should be designed to link classes thematically.

- The college should continue to fund professional development that involves faculty traveling to the best learning community conferences so that they can grow from the types of learning experiences that this researcher has had.
- The college should continue to promote student-centered, collaborative learning, not only within learning community classes, but across the curriculum.

### **Implications for Future Research:**

- Future research must take into account the effects of learning community participation on teachers as well as students. If teachers are to devote additional time to planning, coordinating syllabi, creating and evaluating integrated assignments, and conducting research, the learning community experience must be designed in such a way that it is rewarding for teachers, and the learning community experience must be designed in such a way that it does not create teacher “burn-out.”
- Future research must incorporate more quantitative study of learning community projects without discounting the value of qualitative research. Both student and teacher voices are key components of understanding the effects of learning community participation, but quantitative data can help to assess the learning that occurs, retention rates, and degrees of satisfaction with the college and learning community experiences. Participation in the National Research Project to Assess the Learning in Learning Communities may be an important step to providing such data. This project is discussed later in this chapter.

### **Emergent Themes:**

While I set out to examine only whether learning communities would affect retention, academic achievement, and student attitude toward education at Garrett College, two emergent themes have thus far surfaced as I have examined data:

- As with Sullivan’s findings, data suggests that supportive communication helps students adjust to college. Many students made comments about helping others, getting help from others, forming study groups, and having someone to talk to about academics and/or personal issues (students to students, students to teacher).
- Student comments and the success rate of the learning community cohort seem to call for a campus-wide change in pedagogy. A number of faculty at Garrett College still engage almost exclusively in the traditional lecture as their mode of teaching; however, decades of research and the findings of this study indicate that students learn least effectively from lecture. This is not to say that some lecture is not required, but every instructor can at least occasionally incorporate some type of collaborative learning and degrees of contextual teaching.
  - Hull and Grevelle argue that contextual teaching should be required in community colleges:
    - “It acknowledges that the mind seeks meaning in context and searches for relationships that make sense and appear useful.”
    - “Contextual learning helps students discover the links between what they know and what they are learning.”
    - It changes the teaching role “from deliverer of information to learning facilitator” (pp. 156-157).



## **The Birth of a Program:**

As information contained in this study was disseminated across campus, the faculty and administration began to take steps to launch a learning community initiative. The college administration has made funds available every year since 1998 for me and for other interested individuals to attend learning community conferences. Since 1998, Garrett College has piloted several learning communities, one which integrated technical writing and environmental science. Virginia Broaddus, dean of academic affairs, notes, “That experiment verified the college’s intuitive notion: learning communities featuring cross-curricular, team-building approaches and highlighting connections between disciplines may well provide a preventative cure to the ills that community college students may contract.”

On June 9 and 10, 2005, at a conference at Wagner College on Staten Island, keynote speakers, Jean MacGregor and Phyllis van Slyck discussed ways of “Building a Culture of Assessment.” Part I of the workshop dealt with “Effective Classroom Assessment of Student Learning and Program Learning.” MacGregor noted that we must have learning community program goals, identify student characteristics, pay close attention to the composition of teaching teams, and invest in systems that will support the program. The learning community environment must include curricular elements, co-curricular elements, and pedagogical elements. Measurable outcomes must be identified not only for students, but also for teaching teams, for the curriculum, and for the institution. As the Garrett College learning community initiative begins in earnest, assessment must be a key part of the program. MacGregor’s ideas are well worth exploring as one model.

During the summer of 2005, eleven educators from Garrett College attended the National Summer Institute for Learning Communities in Olympia, Washington at Evergreen State College. This researcher served as leader for the group. Prior to our trip, the team met several times to articulate our goals (Broaddus, et al, 2005) The goals identified and published are as follow:

- To initiate and sustain genuine teaching reform
- To make learning meaningful
- To help students make cross curricular connections
- To provide continuity of assignments across the curriculum
- To provide opportunities for students to see faculty as learners in team-teaching situations
- To create a learning environment that will help to attract more students to our campus
- To help students, even those in developmental learning sequences, to appreciate inquiry-base, collaborative learning
- To support a “buy-in” by the faculty
- To provide support for a faculty teaching community

During our week in Olympia, we mapped out a schedule for a learning community initiative, starting with two learning communities in the fall of 2005, one for adventure sports majors and one for natural resources and wildlife technology majors. Several factors prevented the launching of an NRWT learning community, and the college did not attract the number of adventure sports majors we had anticipated. To salvage at least one learning community, we enrolled both

adventure sports students and international students in the learning community with a theme that focused on sustaining the environment. Informal feedback from students was positive, but the two groups of students remained somewhat aloof from each other, segregating themselves in seating and activities. Learning community team members and I discussed alternative approaches to forming learning communities.

In October of 2005, the college sponsored an all-campus retreat to acquaint all employees with the learning community concept and to build community support for a learning community initiative. The retreat was literally for the entire college community: faculty, administration, maintenance, secretaries, information technology, and invited students. Participants were assigned seats so that they could not segregate themselves by department. Adventure sports and juvenile justice instructors engaged everyone in team building activities. Students performed a skit about their learning community experiences, and everyone had an opportunity to explore the concept of student-centered learning. Informal feedback from across campus was overwhelmingly positive, and the administration announced that Garrett will now have an annual all-campus retreat.

In the fall of 2006, Garrett College will have four learning communities, involving 9 teachers and up to 80 students, no small feat for a college that typically has fewer than 200 freshmen. The themes and courses for the learning communities are as follow:

**1) Liberating the Mind for a Fulfilling Life**

**Courses: Biology 101, English 101, College Algebra, and Speech 101**

This learning community is designed for students who are interested in the Allied Health program or a major in math/science. Rigorous studies will lead students through an exploration of ideas and concepts. Students will engage in projects that require quantitative literacy, use of scientific methods, an organized approach to research, and development of presentation skills. Students will complete one or more major integrated disciplinary projects that will be evaluated by all faculty involved in the learning community.

**2) The Challenges of Leadership in a Changing World**

**Courses: English 92 or English 101 (both will be taught concurrently), Principles and Practices of Juvenile Justice, Leadership Development, and Speech 101**

Juvenile Justice majors should enroll in this learning community. One way of combating juvenile delinquency may be getting delinquents involved in activities that channel energies and build leadership skills. Students in this learning community will discuss challenges they will face as juvenile justice professionals, and ways of challenging and providing positive experiences to youth whom they may serve. Collaborative learning and team teaching will be hallmarks of this learning community.

**3) Paths to Success and a Sense of Self**

**Courses: Art 101 (Basic Design), English 92, College Orientation, Introduction to Algebra and Geometry (Students must enroll in both math courses)**

This learning community is for students who may need some additional preparation beyond high school for a better shot at success in college level course work. English,

math, and learning skills courses in this cluster allow students to polish language, quantitative literacy, and study skills so that they will be better prepared for the fast-paced, rigorous learning required in college courses. Students will also begin earning credits toward college graduation. While traveling a pathway to academic success, students will define identities and explore ways of building confidence and positive self-images.

#### **4) Protecting Planet Earth**

**Courses: Back Country Living; Introduction to Recreation, Parks, and Adventure Sports; English 92 or English 101; Speech 101**

This learning community is designed specifically for first semester Adventure Sports Institute students. These students will begin the team building process as they engage in back country living and learn to survive in the wilderness prior to the official start of the school year. . Students will polish language and presentation skills in English and speech, and will develop major-specific skills in their parks and recreation course. Students will complete a capstone project that integrates knowledge from all courses in the cluster (Brewster, 2006).

In January 2006, this researcher assumed the role of learning communities coordinator. Some of the duties of the position include recruiting faculty to teach in learning communities, planning learning communities, exploring themes for learning communities, and scheduling classes for learning communities. Other duties include publicizing learning communities, conducting research, and publishing results of research. Garrett College is approaching its learning community initiative methodically, learning from pilot studies and the experiences of others. Because the faculty have been involved in writing outcomes and assessment for all programs and all courses at Garrett, to do so for learning communities is a natural next step.

Shepard (2000) argues in “The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture” that if we are “to be compatible with and to support a social constructivist model of teaching and learning, classroom assessment must change.” She advocates a broader range of assessment tools, with more open-ended performance tasks to ensure students are able to reason critically and apply knowledge to real world contexts. To gather data, teachers should use observations, interviews, reflective journals, projects, demonstrations, collections of student work, and students’ self-evaluations.

She states that learning is likely to occur when students have the opportunity to practice a variety of applications, to use what they have learned in new situations. “Good teaching asks about old understandings in new ways, calls for new applications, and draws new connections.” Shepard argues that good assessment should do the same things. Assessment should include not only ongoing student self-assessment, but also ongoing evaluation of teaching. She maintains that such monitoring may indicate a need to redirect instruction, to stop for a mini-lesson, or to make adjustments to the lesson plan. To that end, teachers involved in a learning community must meet on a regular basis to plan and to adjust syllabi, lessons, and assignments. At Garrett College, no classes are scheduled during the lunch hour on Monday and Wednesday; classes are rarely scheduled on Friday. These time slots should allow ample time for learning community instructors to meet regularly.

On March 23 and 24, 2006, a Garrett mathematics professor and I attended a retreat for learning community coordinators in Seattle, sponsored by The Washington

Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. Keynote presenter, Veronica Boix-Mansilla, from the Zero Project at Harvard, noted that assessing faculty and program effectiveness is every bit as important as assessing student learning. She stated that, ideally, learning community faculty and some former learning community students should meet as syllabi are reviewed and integrated assignments, projects, and co-curricular activities are planned.

The goal of the Evidence Project at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education “was to develop effective methods of assessing and improving instructional practices.” The project encourages teachers to get together to take a closer look at student work as “artifacts.” The teachers examine materials they have created and revisit goals and objectives in light of what students’ work shows has been learned. The Evidence Process lets teachers “define for themselves the questions and topics they want to pursue,” set aside a time a space for discussing teaching and learning in the classroom, move away from the isolation that characterizes too many teachers and classrooms, and have opportunities to look closely at student work from more than one viewpoint. The work that students produce is indicative of the teaching that has occurred (pp. 1-3). Practices that Boix-Mansilla shared and approaches used in the Evidence Process may be valuable resources for learning community faculty at Garrett College.

Many educators have the misconception that outcomes and assessment is the latest educational fad and that it will soon go away. I disagree. Teachers must articulate what it is that they want students to learn and what students will do to demonstrate that learning has occurred. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education has given the faculty at Garrett College the task of writing outcomes and assessment for every course as described in *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*. Institutional, program, and course effectiveness, and the ongoing assessment of success are measured to some degree by the retention, persistence, and attrition of an institution’s students (p. 25). As stated earlier, students in the case study, which is the primary focus of this dissertation, were general studies majors. Middle States stresses the need for a strong general education program:

A general education program—developed, owned, and reviewed by the institution’s faculty—should be purposeful, coherent, engaging, and rigorous. General education skills may be taught or developed as part of courses in the major, in separate courses, or through a decentralized distribution. However, the skills and knowledge derived from general education and the major should be integrated because general education and study in depth, together, comprise a quality undergraduate education (p. 37).

The use of the word integrated is of interest here because integration is a significant part of what learning communities are all about. Middle States further emphasizes that assessment of student learning (and program effectiveness) must be an ongoing process and that information derived from such assessment is to be used to improve teaching and learning (pp. 51-52).

In *Student Learning Assessment: Options and Resources*, the Middle States Commission states that “All campus members are partners in teaching and learning and have a role in evaluating and enhancing student learning” (p. 5). The Middle States Commission also sanctions both quantitative and qualitative assessment, noting that “A common misconception is that qualitative assessments are not as reliable, valid, or

objective as quantitative ones.” Instructors (and researchers) may “provide the student with a prose evaluation” or use a narrative (p. 34). The fact that this accreditation body endorses the use of qualitative data further validates the use of such data in this dissertation.

As the faculty at Garrett College complete the tasks of identifying outcomes for all courses and devising assessment tools to measure learning, we face another task.: we must begin writing outcomes and assessment for every learning community that we develop, designing integrated assignments for each learning community, and designing ways for all faculty within a learning community to assess student learning and the effectiveness of teaching. Involvement in a learning community means that no instructor has to “go it alone.” Faculty collaboration serves the same purpose as student collaboration—promoting learning and, to some extent, division of labor. We want students to form communities of learners. We too must become communities of learners with the opportunity to learn from the expertise and practices of each other, as well as from our students. As we learn, we must collect data that will accurately assess learning, teaching, and program success. In so doing, we model the type of collaborative learning in which we want our students to engage.

#### **Future Research:**

By June 1, 2006, this researcher will submit a proposal to the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education in a bid for Garrett College to be selected as one of 10 colleges nationally to participate in a National Project on Assessing the Learning in Learning Communities. The project will begin September 2006 and end June 2008. According to Lardner and Malnarich, co-directors for the Washington Center, “The purpose of this project is to strengthen the national learning community movement by developing collaborative assessment practices that focus on the characteristics of student learning made possible by learning community contexts.” The project builds on the following core assumptions:

1. Learning community work should be designed in the context of an analysis of campus facts including disaggregated student demographics, disaggregated student retention and academic achievement rates, and the identification of curricular trouble spots——courses with high drop-out rates and/or low success rates—as well as trouble within courses.

If Garrett College is selected, a team of four faculty members will have the opportunity to more fully assess the teaching and learning in learning communities. The team will have the opportunity to work with others throughout the nation to devise instruments to gather data that more accurately assesses how and to what degree participation in a learning community fosters deep learning, a higher rate of retention, and a sense of community.

2. Students within learning communities need opportunities to develop and demonstrate substantive learning that draws on disciplinary and interdisciplinary understanding and is connected to problems and issues in the world.
3. Collaborative discussions about authentic assessments of student learning provide an ongoing source of learning and intellectual engagement for faculty.

4. Learning community programs are enriched by strong scholarship of teaching and learning initiatives.

To be eligible, campus learning community programs must have the following:

- A commitment to adapting the material from *The Evidence Process* as the basis for assessing the learning that learning communities make possible.
- A willingness to share the results of their on-going work in venues organized by Washington Center, including any or all of the following: scholarship of teaching and learning retreats, print publications and/or an e-journal, and teleconference calls;
- A designated facilitator who will coordinate the assessment group and be responsible for reporting back to Washington Center;
- A team of at least three faculty members who are committed to exploring collaborative approaches to assessing student learning in the context of the learning community (Lardner & Malnarich, 2006).

Participation in this research project will provide assistance to Garrett College faculty researchers in designing data collection instruments, and in collecting, synthesizing, interpreting and publishing data. Should the college not be selected as one of the participating institutions, the effects of learning community participation on both students and faculty must still be assessed as an ongoing part of the learning community initiative.

Involvement in learning communities means doing more work, sacrificing more time, and engaging in heroic efforts to reform educational practices and better serve the needs of our students. Brown and Moffett (1999) write in *The Hero's Journey: How Educators Can Transform Schools and Improve Learning*, "The hero's journey is present in all educational setting when the power of shared inquiry and commitment overcomes despair and leads to possibility and hopefulness" (p. 13). Learning communities are not a panacea. One size does not fit all. Those involved must be open to change and to ongoing learning—both teachers and students. Learning communities cannot be mandated. Brown and Moffett note, "The only real and enduring changes within a system occur as a result of consensus building and shared inquiry." Experts cannot transform education. Teachers, administrators, and others who are part of the educational institution must work together to "transform knowledge into wisdom." If the learning community initiative is to succeed at Garrett College, everyone who supports the mission of the institution must "play an active, purposeful, and ongoing role in key initiatives and programs" (pp. 54-55).

In conclusion, consider once more the questions this dissertation was designed to answer:

- **Does participation in a learning community affect student academic performance?**

All 15 students interviewed for this case study say that it does. Academic records for all 19 students in the cohort indicate that it does.

- **Does participation in a learning community affect student attitude toward education?**

All 15 students interviewed for this case study indicated that their attitudes were more positive because they were participating in a learning community.

- **Does participation in a learning community affect student retention?**

All but 2 of the 15 students interviewed for this case study said they would have stayed in school without participation in the learning community, but all 15 indicated that participation in the learning community made learning easier and more enjoyable, and that they developed strong social ties with students they would not have gotten to know had they not been in the learning community.

- **Should Garrett College fund a learning community initiative as a result of data collected from students in this case study?**

Funding began in September of 2005 with an allocation of \$2,000 for co-curricular activities for learning community students and with another \$2,000 to fund an all-campus retreat. Teachers participating in Fall 2006 learning communities will receive a \$500 stipend for the extra planning, meeting time, and grading of integrated assignments that learning communities will require. Preliminary results from this case study and pilot studies, as well as participation by 11 Garrett College educators in the 2005 National Summer Institute on Learning Communities paved the way for funding.

The Garrett College learning community experience replicates results of learning community initiatives conducted on other college campuses and published in numerous books, magazines, and journals. The faculty at Garrett College has not climbed on a band wagon, nor should the faculty at any other college. Attendance at conferences, reading, discussion, professional development, planning, pilot projects, and this case study have shown that a learning community initiative at Garrett College is a productive undertaking. The faculty, staff, and administration at each institution must decide how to best meet the needs of their students; however, learning communities are definitely worth consideration.

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Appendix A  
**Permission to Access Academic Files**

I \_\_\_\_\_ do hereby attest that I am at least eighteen years of age and do hereby grant permission to Lonnie C. Brewster, Professor of English at Garrett College, to access my student file at Garrett College for purposes of educational research. I understand that my identity will not be revealed in any publications which discuss classes in which I am enrolled/have enrolled, or which discuss my academic records or ethnography.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
**Script for Study: Personal Interview**  
**Learning Community Participants**

Good morning (afternoon, evening). Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. The goal of my research is to determine what effects, if any, your participation in a learning community has had on student academic achievement, attitude toward education, and student retention. The information gathered will be used for my doctoral dissertation. It will also be shared with the administration of this college and will be used to improve learning community experiences for future students.

I want to point out several things before we start:

- Your participation is entirely voluntary and you do not have to respond to every item or question.
- Your responses will remain anonymous and confidentiality will be maintained. If you were enrolled in a class that I taught this semester, your grade has already been submitted and you are no longer eligible to enroll in any course that I teach.
- Neither your class standing, athletic status, nor grades will be affected by your refusing to participate or by your withdrawal from the study.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

**The Interview Questions:**

- Describe for me how you learn best (prompt for examples).
- Give me your definition of a learning community.
- Tell me about your learning community experience (If necessary, prompt for information on academic achievement, changes in attitude toward school, retention, what the student learned, what he/she remembers, whether the experience was enjoyable).
- Would you recommend the learning community experience to other students? Why or why not?
- If there had been anything about the LC you could have changed, what would it have been and why?
- What are your plans for next year? (Prompt for information regarding educational plans, if necessary, reasons if the student is not continuing education)
- Is there anything I haven't asked about that you think I should know?

Thank you for participating in this research project.